Pictorial History of the

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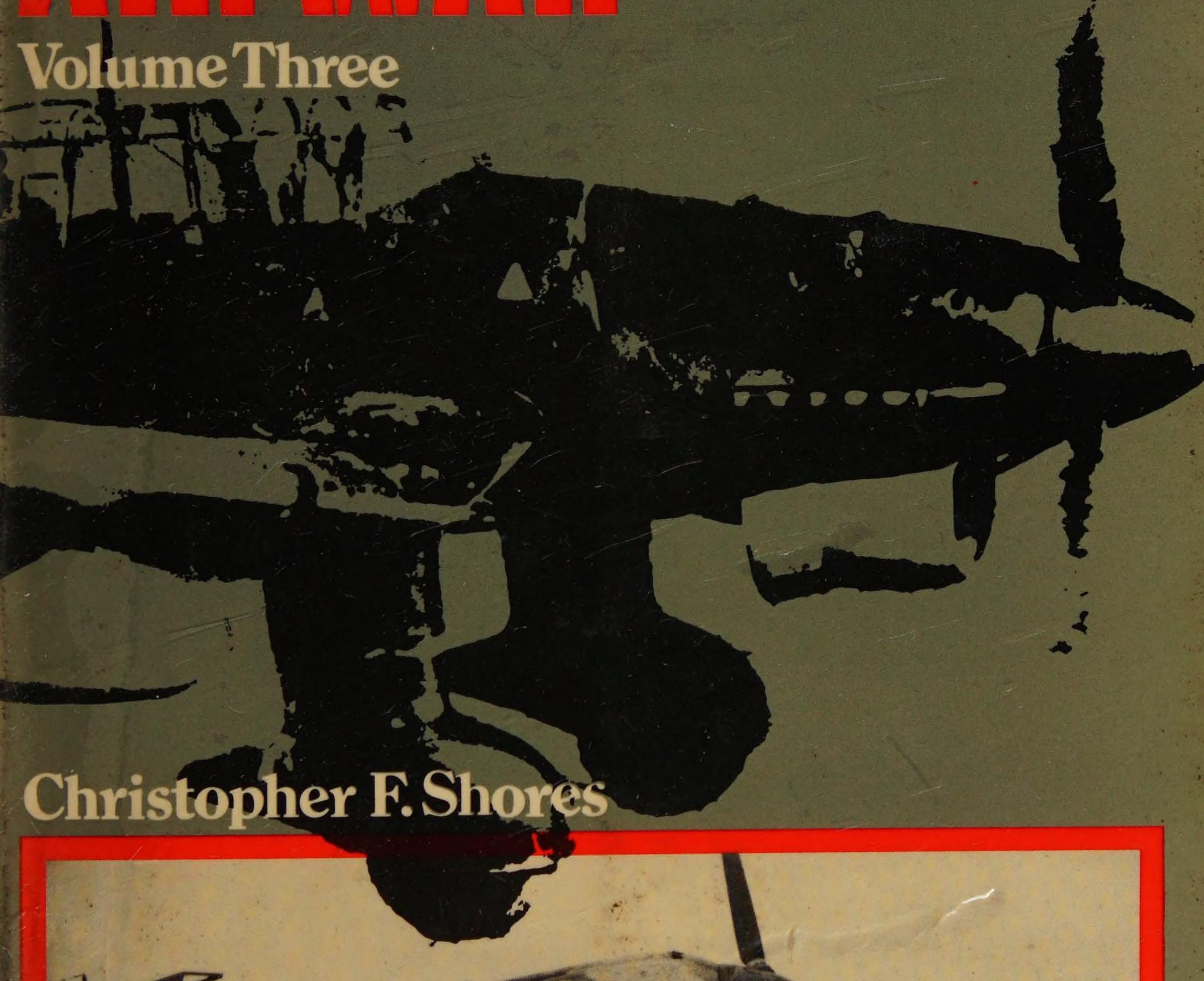
AIR WAR

Volume Three



Christopher F. Shores

Pictorial History of the Mediterranean Air War

CHRISTOPHER F. SHORES

This last volume of the Mediterranean Air War series gives a fascinating glimpse of how the major campaigns in the theatre looked from 'the other side of the hill'. The early battles between the Regia Aeronautica and the Royal Air Force, the defeat of the Royal Navy by the Luftwaffe during the battle of Malta and the rise of the great German fighter aces, the arrival on the scene of the USAAF, the fierce air battles that marked the North African campaign to culminate in the elimination of the Luftwaffe are all described through the eyes of the Axis air commanders. Most of the material in the book has not previously been published and there are many useful and illuminating orders of battle and a host of fresh photographs.

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Air War Vol.III

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Pictorial History of the Mediterranean Air War

Volume III: Axis Air Forces 1940–45

Christopher F. Shores

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Glossary

Ranks

German (Abbrev)	*Italian (Abbrev)*	*British Equivalent*
Unteroffizier (Uffz)	—	Corporal
Feldwebel (Fw)	Sergente (Serg)	Sergeant
Oberfeldwebel (Obfw)	Sergente Maggiore (Serg Magg)	Flight Sergeant
	Maresciallo (Mar)	Warrant Officer
Leutnant (Lt)	Sottotenente (Sottoten)	Pilot Officer
Oberleutnant (Oblt)	Tenente (Ten)	Flying Officer
Hauptmann (Hpt)	Capitano (Capt)	Flight Lieutenant
Major (Maj)	Maggiore (Magg)	Squadron Leader
Oberstleutnant (Obstlt)	Tenente Colonello (Ten Col)	Wing Commander
Oberst (Oberst)	Colonello (Col)	Group Captain

Units

German	*Italian*
Staffel	Squadriglia
Gruppe	Gruppo
Geschwader	Stormo
Fliegerkorps	Aerobrigata
Luftflotte	Squadra

Equivalent

German and Italian units have no direct equivalent with those of the RAF or USAAF, though organisation was in many ways similar to the latter force. The Staffel and squadriglia were each about the size of a large RAF flight, and in most cases three Staffeln made up a Gruppe, three squadriglie making up a gruppo. While an RAF squadron might have two or three flights, it would not be as large as a Gruppe or gruppo.

The major operational unit in either case was the Geschwader or stormo, normally made up of three Gruppen (Geschwader) or two gruppi (stormo). Because of the different sized units, the rank structure in the Axis air forces tended to be entirely different from that in the RAF, and there was no set rank to command any unit. A Staffel was generally commanded by an Oberleutnant, a Gruppe by a Hauptmann, and a Geschwader by a Major. It was not unknown however for an Oberleutnant to command a Gruppe, and a Hauptmann *or* an Oberstleutnant to command a Geschwader. Italian command positions were similar. This arose because, unlike the RAF where the establishment of, say squadron-leaders was in direct relation to the number of squadrons, in the German and Italian air forces there was a fixed establishment overall of certain ranks, regardless of the number of units with command posts available.

Introduction

This third volume of the Mediterranean Air War series covers the operations of the Axis air forces—the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica, and latterly the units of the Republica Sociale Italiana—throughout the war in this area. Starting with a great preponderance of strength, the Regia Aeronautica engaged the Armée de l'Air briefly in Southern France, and the Royal Air Force over Malta, the Western Desert and Greece, steadily losing the initiative until joined by units of the Luftwaffe early in 1941. A long, hard battle over Malta and the Desert then followed, brightened by the brilliant successes in Greece and Crete in April and May 1941, and by the continually inspired performances of the German fighter pilots and Stuka crews, and the Italian torpedo-bomber units.

Gradually in 1942 the balance swung to the RAF, joined late in the year by the USAAF, and against sheer weight of numbers the Axis air forces were worn down and whittled away. Until the expulsion from North Africa in early 1943 they continued to achieve notable successes, but the invasions of Sicily and Southern Italy in the summer of 1943, the capitulation of the Italian government, and the constant call of other fronts, coupled with the ever-increasing size and the improving equipment of the Allied air forces, steadily reduced the remaining German and Italian units to near-impotence.

The invasion of western France in June 1944, following immediately after the fall of Rome, marked the beginning of the end, and by late that year only a tiny handful of units remained, doing what they could before total destruction overwhelmed them.

These operations, and the side-shows in Iraq, the Aegean and the

Balkans, are described here. Much assistance has been received from my friends and colleagues Hans Ring and Corrado Ricci, to whom my deepest thanks; reference for the various orders of battle has been greatly facilitated by the standard two-volume reference, "L'Aeronautica Italiana Nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale" by Giuseppe Santoro, and by various issues of the magazine of the regrettably now-defunct 'Gruppe 66'.

To those whose appetites have been whetted by these volumes for a deeper study of the air operations in the Mediterranean, 'Fighters Over the Desert', and the forthcoming 'Fighters Over Tunisia', in the preparation of which this author played a major part, are recommended.

CHRISTOPHER F. SHORES

First Days of War

For nine months following the outbreak of World War II in Western Europe, the Mediterranean remained at peace. Throughout the period of the 'Phoney War', September 3rd–May 10th, 1940, the intentions of Benito Mussolini, Fascist dictator of Italy, remained uncertain, but the presence of the bulk of the French fleet in the area, together with the combined Anglo-French forces in the colonial and mandated territories at each end of the North African coastline, maintained an uneasy peace.

The violent and highly-successful German 'Blitzkrieg 'which began at dawn on May 10th, 1940 soon had much of Northern France and the Low Countries overrun, and the British Expeditionary Force streaming home across the English Channel from the area of Dunkirk. Now was Mussolini's opportunity.

For long 'Il Duce' had eyed with envy the possessions of France and Great Britain in North and East Africa. Control of Egypt, the Suez Canal and the Sudan would allow a land link with the Italian colonies of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somaliland to be forged, while possession of French and British Somaliland would ensure complete control of the Red Sea. Neutralisation of French North Africa, Gibraltar and Alexandria, and occupation of Malta would turn the Mediterranean into an Italian lake, and would give Mussolini a completely free hand to pursue his policies in the Balkans. Already Italian forces had occupied Albania, but now Greece and Yugoslavia would be virtually at his mercy.

The greatest problem for him was that it had all happened too early; the Italian forces, particularly the Regia Aeronautica, were just

embarking on a programme of modernisation and re-equipment not planned to be completed for another two years. Equipment which had been the height of modernity at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, was now showing signs of definite obsolescence. However, realising that France must soon fall, and that the British would then almost certainly be forced to seek an armistice, he knew that if Italy was to partake in the spoils of victory, then action had to be taken forthwith—before the situation in France had been decided beyond question. Therefore, on the evening of June 10th, 1940, he declared war on France and the United Kingdom, his forces in Northern Italy advancing into Southern France to annex the area around Nice.

At the outbreak of war the Regia Aeronautica was an impressive force, and apart from a substantial contingent in the East African possessions (which are outside the scope of this book), the order of battle on June 10th, 1940 was as follows:—

1ª Squadra Aerea (Air Army)—Milan, Northern Italy

4° *Divisione BT (Bomber Division)—Novara*

7° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Lonate	(98°, 99° Gruppi)
13° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Piacenza	(4°, 25° Gruppi)
43° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Cameri	(11°, 43° Gruppi)

2ª *Divisione CT (Fighter Division), Caselle*

3° Stormo CT	Fiat CR42	Novi Ligure	(18°, 23° Gruppi)
53° Stormo CT	Fiat CR42	Caselle	(150°, 151° Gruppi
54° Stormo CT	Fiat CR42	Airasca	(152°, 153° Gruppi)

6ª *Divisione BT Padua*

16° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Vicenza	
18° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Aviano	(31°, 37° Gruppi)
47° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Ghedi	
9° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR42	Gorizia	

2ª Squadra Aerea—Palermo, Sicily

3ª *Divisione BT, Catania*

11° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Comiso
34° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Catania
41° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Gela

11ª *Brigata BT (Bomber Brigade)*

30° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Sciacca
36° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Castelvetrano
96° Gruppo BaT	Savoia SM85	Pantelleria (dive-bombers)

1ª *Divisione CT, Palermo*

1° Stormo CT	Fiat CR32 & 42	Palermo	(17°, 157° Gruppi)
6° Gruppo Autonomo	Macchi MC200	Catania	

3ª Squadra Aerea—Rome, Western-Central Italy

3ª *Divisione BT, Viterbo*

9° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Viterbo	
12° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Ciampino N	(41°, 42° Gruppi)
46° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Pisa	

8ª *Brigata CT* (*Fighter Brigade*), *Ciampino S*

51° Stormo CT	Fiat G50	Ciampino S	(20°, 21° Gruppi)
52° Stormo CT	Fiat CR32 & G50	Pontedera	(22°, 24° Gruppi)
7° Gruppo Autonomo Combattimento	Breda Ba88	Campiglia (attack aircraft)	

4ª Zona Aerea Territoriale (Territorial Air Zone)—Bari, South-East Italy

37° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81	Lecce	(54°, 55° Gruppi)
35° Stormo BM	Cant Z506B	Brindisi	(Maritime Bombers)
2° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR32	Grottaglie	

Aeronautica Della Sardegna (Air Component in Sardinia)—Cagliari

8° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Villacidro	
32° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Decimomannu	
31° Stormo BM	Cant Z560B	Elmas	
9° Gruppo Autonomo CT	Fiat CR32	Monserrato	
19° Gruppo Autonomo Combattimento	Breda Ba88	Alghero	

Aeronautica Dell'Albania—Tirana

38° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81	Tirana	(39°, 40° Gruppi)
160° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR32	Tirana	

Aeronautica dell'Egeo (Air Component in the Aegean)—Rhodes

31° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81	Rhodes	
161ª Squadriglia CM	Meridionali Ro43 & Ro44	Leros	(Floatplane fighters)
163ª Squadriglia CT	Fiat CR32	Rhodes	

Aeronautica della Libya—Tripoli

Settore Ouest (*Western Sector*), *Tripoli*

15° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81	Castel Benito	(47° Gruppo)
33° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Bir el Bhera	
50° Stormo assalto	Caproni Ca310 & Fiat CR32	Sorman	

13° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR32 & CR42	Castel Benito	
1° Gruppo APC	Caproni Ghibli	Mellaha	(Colonial aircraft)
99ª Squadriglia Aviazione Sahariana	Caproni Ghibli	Hun	
Settore Est (*Eastern Sector*), *Tobruk*			
14° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81	El Adem	(45° Gruppo)
10° Stormo BT	Savoia SM79	Benina	
8° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR32	T2	
10° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR42	Benina	
2° Gruppo APC	Caproni Ghibli	El Adem	
26ª Squadriglia AS	Caproni Ghibli	Kufra	

In addition to this force were 37 squadriglie of army co-operation Meridionali Ro37 biplanes and Caproni Ghibli and Ca310 monoplanes attached to the armies on the ground in all the various sectors, and the units of the Aviazione per La R.Marina (Naval Air Force) which comprised 16 squadriglie and three flights of Cant Z501 flying-boats and three squadriglie of Cant Z506B floatplanes, based variously in Southern Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and the Aegean. The total strength of the Italian air forces was 3,296 operational aircraft, of which 1,796 were on hand with the units ready for action. They were backed up by ten squadriglie of transport aircraft (Savoia SM73, SM74, SM57 and SM82) and the aircraft of the commercial airlines which had been taken over for communications duties, and which comprised ten Savoia SM83s, eight Fiat G18s, four Junkers Ju52/3ms, four Cant Z506 floatplanes, four Macchi MC100s and two Fiat G12s.

Of the main equipment in service, the bombers tended to be of more modern design than the fighters, the Savoia SM79, Cant Z1007 and Fiat BR20 all being comparable in performance and armament with the best aircraft in service with other European powers. The Savoia SM81 was a slow bomber-transport with a fixed undercarriage, unsuitable for day operations where any organised opposition could be expected. The Cant Z506B floatplane, another efficient and modern design, was also used to a considerable extent as a bombing machine, mainly against coastal and maritime targets. Unlike the bombers of most other nations however, with the exception of the BR20 all the above types were of trimotor design. This was imposed on Italian designers to some extent by the shortage of suitable high-performance engines, and while it did offer increased power and speed, this was at

the expense of bombload (since additional fuel had to be carried for the third engine), and of forward-firing defensive armament.

In the fighter divisions Italy's reluctance to give up the agile biplane was greatly in evidence. Experience with the Fiat CR32 in Spain against early low-performance French and Russian monoplane fighters employed by the Republicans had led the Regia Aeronautica to the conclusion that there was still a place for the biplane in a modern air force. Indeed, the Fiat CR42, one of the finest biplane fighters ever built, making up the bulk of the Italian fighter force, was a somewhat later design than the monoplane G50 from the same stable, which was in service in much smaller numbers. Indeed the only monoplane fighter in service which could enjoy anything approaching a performance comparable with modern fighters elsewhere, was the Macchi MC200—and the few of these that were in service in June 1940 were about to be grounded for several weeks following a series of accidents.

Even more than the bombers, the fighters were handicapped by the absence of a modern in-line engine in the 1,000hp class. They were also armed with only two machine guns each, usually 12.7mm weapons which, despite their substantial calibre lacked muzzle velocity and used impact-explosive ammunition greatly lacking in penetrative power. Consequently they were at a further disadvantage when faced with the heavily armed and armoured aircraft then appearing in service elsewhere.

Of the other aircraft in service, the Cant Z501 was a small flyingboat of elderly design, the Meridionali Ro37 was a two-seater army co-operation biplane of indifferent performance, and the Caproni Ghibli, Ca310 and Ca311 were small twin-engined light liaison and bombing aircraft, not really suitable for other than colonial operations. Two Breda types were entering service as attack aircraft, the twin-engined Ba88 and the single-engined Ba65. Both were two-seaters and neither were to see very widespread service, the Ba88 seeing only very little operational use due to its disappointing performance and serviceability record, while the Ba65 operated for a short while in Libya. The one dive-bomber gruppo equipped with SM85 aircraft was soon to exchange these for Junkers Ju87B aircraft purchased from Germany; and the Savoia type was not to see action.

In Southern France and French North Africa the Italians were faced by that percentage of the Armée de l'Air and Aeronavale which were not engaged in fighting the Germans further north—mainly units in

the process of re-equipment or operational training. In Egypt the RAF maintained a small air force of Gloster Gladiator biplane fighters, Bristol Blenheim bombers, and Westland Lysander army co-operation aircraft, about a quarter the size of the Aeronautica della Libya, while on Malta there was nothing save a few hastily-erected Sea Gladiators and some Short Sunderland flyingboats. The Royal Navy had in the Mediterranean the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*, which was serving with the Mediterranean Fleet based on Alexandria, but this carried no regular fighter squadron; a fighter flight of Sea Gladiators was, however, rapidly collected from Malta and was being readied for action.

Only 2ª Squadra was quick off the mark, 35 SM79s leaving Sicily on June 11th to attack Valetta, Hal Far and Kalafrana on Malta; the raid was escorted by 18 fighters. A second raid was launched by 38 SM79s, covered by 12 fighters on the same three targets later in the day, and this time two Gladiators intercepted, claiming one of the escort shot down. A Macchi 200 was the type claimed, but in fact these aircraft were grounded at the time, and were not to undertake their first sorties until some three months later.

In Libya however the RAF had acted first, catching units of the Regia Aeronautica by surprise on the ground at El Adem, five Ro37s, five SM79s, six SM81s and two Ghiblis being damaged to some extent. The CR42s of 8° Gruppo were scrambled at once and claimed two of the attacking Blenheims shot down, while during a second raid in the afternoon a third was claimed.

France was the initial preoccupation of the Regia Aeronautica, and the first attacks on French targets were made by 21 SM79s of 32° Stormo from Sardinia on June 12th, these flying across the Mediterranean to attack Bizerta in Tunisia. Next day the attack was taken up by units of 2ª Squadra in Sicily, 33 SM79s of 30° and 36° Stormi raiding airfields in Northern Tunisia, escorted by 1° Stormo CR42s. On this same date 1ª Squadra in the north made its first raids on metropolitan France, 23 CR42s of 23° Gruppo attacking the airfield at Fayence; their strafing was supplemented by bombs from nine BR20s of 13° Stormo, while ten more then bombed the Aeronavale airfield at Hyeres, 27 CR42s of 151° Gruppo following them in and shooting down a Vought V156 dive-bomber as it was about to land. At the same time a further 28 BR20s of 7° and 43° Stormi attacked the naval base at Toulon, losing two of their number to Dewoitine 520s of GC III/6.

SM79s from 3ª Squadra in the Rome area joined the attack on the 13th, 9° Stormo aircraft attacking French shipping off the Riviera coast, more SM97s of 46° Stormo repeating the attack next day. The 15th was probably the busiest day in the air, 3ª Squadra bombers again being in action, this time over Corsica. Six 9° Stormo SM79s bombed Ghisonaccia, while five more from 46° Stormo, this time escorted by nine 22° Gruppo Fiat G50s, attacked the port of Calvi.

In the north on the 15th 27 CR42s of 150° Gruppo attacked the Cuers/Pierrefeu airfield, where they strafed a substantial number of aircraft on the ground; they were intercepted by two GC III/6 D520s and lost two of their number. Shortly after this, 24 more CR42s of 23° Gruppo strafed the Armée de l'Air airfield at Cannet le Moures, 20 miles north-east of Cuers, claiming 15 aircraft damaged on the ground; they were attacked by the same pair of D520s, and lost one of their number to Adj Pierre Le Gloan, who was to claim a total of three CR42s on this date. The CR42 pilots claimed one fighter shot down in return, but none were in fact lost. A BR20 reconnoitring the results of the raid was then intercepted and shot down, also by Le Gloan.

A third formation of CR42s, this time of 18° Gruppo, became engaged with French fighters which they identified as Morane 406s; they were in fact Aeronavale Bloch 151s of Escadrille AC 3. The Fiats claimed three for the loss of two, two of the French fighters actually being shot down and three damaged; one French pilot rammed a CR42, but this was the only claim made by the pilots of the Blochs.

Poor weather prevented further activity by 1ª Squadra during the next few days, but attacks on Tunisia and Corsica were maintained by 2ª and 3ª Squadra, and by the units in Sardinia. Indeed on June 16th the dozen Breda 88s of 19° Gruppo Autonomo Combattimento bombed and strafed targets on Corsica, while six 8° Stormo SM79s bombed Ajaccio. Next day 8° Stormo bombers were joined by Cant Z506B floatplanes to attack Bizerta again, and these latter were also to reconnoitre the North African ports of Oran and Algiers, where they bombed French shipping.

The last attacks were launched from Sicily, Rome and Sardinia on the 19th, when 11 SM79s of 8° Stormo and nine Ba88s of 19° Gruppo from Sardinia, with 11 SM79s of 9° Stormo, 15 SM79s of 12° Stormo and six G50s of 22° Gruppo from the Rome area attacked Corsican targets, and six 36° Stormo SM79s from Sicily attacked Bizerta. On June 20th, 1940 France ceased fighting, the Axis partners emerging victorious.

Libya—Early Operations

Within the first 48 hours of hostilities British patrols had moved forward and taken the frontier fort at Capuzzo. An immediate attack to retake it was launched on the 13th, when the first fighter versus fighter combats occurred, CR32s and Ghiblis engaging Gladiators over the area in a fight from which one Italian aircraft of each type failed to return. Two days later the first Breda 65s arrived, 159ª Squadriglia with these aircraft joining 12° Gruppo of 50° Stormo to begin operations; a second squadriglia would follow in September.

Lack of movement on the ground allowed the development of a pattern in the air, fighters patrolling over the front, and escorting army co-operation and reconnaissance aircraft, while interceptions were also made of bombers attacking ports and lines of communication behind the front. SM81s of 39° Stormo on Rhodes raided Alexandria at night during the month, while Libya-based SM79s attacked by day, proving generally too fast for the Gladiators and Blenheim-fighters which attempted to intercept them.

Above the front the opposing fighters frequently clashed; on June 17th CR42s of 10° Gruppo encountered Gladiators and a Hurricane, one Gladiator being shot down for the loss of several CR42s. On July 3rd the CR42s of 8° Gruppo were hard hit in a combat with Gladiators over their own airfield, four of five taking off being shot down. Against the small formations of raiding Blenheims they had more success however, and several of these were shot down, though the occasional Sunderlands which were intercepted off the coast proved harder prey.

August 4th proved a good day for the fighters; in their first combat the pilots of 50° Stormo Assalto shot down three Gladiators, which were part of a formation engaged by Ba65s of 159ª Squadriglia and CR32s of 160ª Squadriglia; total claims for the day in Libya were for seven Gladiators and three Blenheims. Two of the British pilots shot down by the CR32s were Flt Lt M. T. Pattle and Flg Off P. Wykeham-Barnes of 80 Squadron, both later to become outstandingly successful fighter pilots. Next day CR42s of 10° Gruppo at last managed to shoot down a Sunderland; several had been claimed before this date, but this was the first actually to fail to return to its base.

CR 42s of 9° and 10° Gruppi were engaged in a bigger fight on August 8th when escorting Ro37s over the front. Intercepted by Gladiators, they claimed five of the attackers (two were actually lost), but lost seven CR42s. Serg Lido Poli continued to fight after being

badly wounded in his right arm, and claimed to have shot down one Gladiator. He subsequently crash-landed, and was taken to hospital where his arm was amputated; he later received Italy's highest award for bravery, the Medaglio d'Oro (Gold Medal).

The British were now introducing a growing number of Hurricanes into Egypt, and on August 12th the SM79s finally fell foul of one of these when attacking shipping at Bardia. Here a single Hurricane attacked and shot down three of the trimotor bombers, while another fell to Gladiators, which attacked in strength; somewhat optimistically, the gunners claimed to have shot down seven of the attacking fighters. Some weeks later on September 10th, ten SM79s attacking Sidi Barrani were intercepted by Blenheims and Gladiators, two more failing to return, while another was lost over Alexandria next day.

Finally, on September 13th, all was ready for an advance into Egypt, and on this date Marshall Graziani's army of four divisions, supported by 200 tanks and adequate artillery, and with a fifth division in reserve, moved across the frontier and quickly took Sollum. Pressing on slowly, the airfield complex at Sidi Barrani was occupied, but a few miles to the east of this objective the forward troops came to a halt and began digging in.

Reinforcements were on the way, 27° Gruppo BT with SM79s flying in from Italy, but on the 15th two more SM79s from a formation of five fell to attacking Hurricanes. However 26 CR42s of 13° Gruppo caught nine Blenheims over Libyan territory on the 18th, and unopposed by any escorting fighters, claimed five of them shot down. Throughout the latter part of September there were several battles between Blenheims and CR42s during which the former generally came off slightly the worse, but apart from odd skirmishes, October was relatively quiet. During that month other Italian forces had attacked Greece, as will be related later, and early in November units of the RAF were withdrawn from Egypt for service in this area.

Despite this weakening, which considerably affected the number of Blenheims appearing over Italian territory, British fighters were still much in evidence, substantial combats between CR42s, Gladiators and Hurricanes taking place on November 19th and 20th. The British were secretly preparing to launch a sudden surprise blow on the troops in the Sidi Barrani and Sollum areas however, and were conserving their forces for this, and so the latter part of November represented the calm before the storm.

Malta and the Mediterranean

Following the initial attack on Malta 2ª Squadra became involved in attacks on French North Africa, and it was June 26th before the SM79s could return in strength, 26 of them then attacking Hal Far and Takali airfields, and Valetta harbour. This resumption of attacks led to the despatch on the 28th of four Hurricanes from Egypt, and when 16 escorted bombers returned on the 30th five fighters were in the air to meet them. In an effort to neutralise this new defence, 24 CR42s of 4° Stormo, which had now been formed to add to the strength of 2ª Squadra, strafed Hal Far airfield on July 4th, without however, damaging any of the British fighters.

2ª Squadra was back in force on the 6th, 30 aircraft attacking the airfields and Valetta in three waves, ten more bombers and nine fighters repeating the attack next day. Two attacks followed on the 10th, and on the 12th nine CR42s of 23° Gruppo, one of the newly-arrived units of 4° Stormo, and late of 3° Stormo, engaged four British fighters while on a reconnaissance over the island, claiming two shot down. Next day 11 CR42s again claimed two fighters after meeting three over the island; the RAF in fact suffered no loss, though one Hurricane was damaged. Eight SM79s bombed Valetta meanwhile, losing one of their number.

Meantime, on July 8th the British Mediterranean Fleet had left Alexandria on learning that the Italian Fleet was at sea, and at once 11 SM81s of 39° Stormo on Rhodes were despatched to attack the vessels. During the 9th and 10th the two fleets were engaged briefly off Calabria in what the Italians named the Punta Stilo battle, bombers and floatplanes from Aegean bases carrying out several attacks, three raids being made by 37° Stormo SM81s on the 9th alone. HMS *Eagle*'s trio of Sea Gladiators were first met by attacking bombers on July 13th, when three SM79s were shot down by them. Four days later however SM81s of 39° Stormo managed to badly damage the destroyer *Havock*.

Eagle was no longer the only British aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. Following the French surrender, the British had at once begun the formation of Force 'H' in the Western Mediterranean, based on Gibraltar, and late in June *Ark Royal* joined this fleet. Early in July this force was involved in attacks on the French fleet in an effort to neutralise it, but immediately thereafter, Italian aircraft began shadowing the British vessels. Blackburn Skua fighter/dive-bombers were

launched against them, and on July 9th an SM79 and a Z506B were shot down by these; a second SM79 was lost to these aircraft on the 11th.

Over Malta the attacks of 2ª Squadra continued, 23° Gruppo losing its first CR42 on July 16th when 12 of these fighters were engaged with two British fighters during a reconnaissance sweep, both of the latter being claimed shot down. A few more raids were made before the end of July, but then on the 31st another combat occurred; while escorting a single photographic reconnaissance SM79 over the island, 12 CR42s reported being engaged by six Gladiators. One Gladiator was shot down, but the Capitano leading the Italian formation failed to return.

Early in August HMS *Ark Royal* escorted the old carrier *Argus* to within a few miles of Malta, and a quantity of Hurricanes were then flown off to reinforce the defenders of the island. When ten SM79s approached Hal Far on the 15th five of these newly-arrived fighters attacked the escort which managed to hold them off and shoot one down. Raids were now concentrated on the airfields, but remained sporadic, only two more being made before the 29th when ten Cant Z1007bis bombers, freshly-arrived in Sicily, tried their hand at bombing Takali.

Re-equipment was continuing steadily throughout the Regia Aeronautica, several bomber units at this time exchanging their ageing SM81s for SM79s, BR20s or Z1007bis's. The British Mediterranean Fleet continued to prowl throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, shadowers and attacking formations on several occasions falling foul of the ever-present Sea Gladiators, which claimed a pair of SM79s on the 17th and a Z506B on the 31st. Two Cant shadowers, a Z501 and a Z506B, were despatched by *Ark Royal*'s Skuas on the latter date over the Western Mediterranean.

The British introduced a new, and more dangerous threat to aircraft involved in maritime duties at the start of September, with the arrival in the Mediterranean of HMS *Illustrious*, the Royal Navy's newest armoured fleet carrier, which had aboard a squadron of Fairey Fulmar fighters. These shot down a Z501 and two SM79s on September 2nd, claiming two more bombers on the 4th; by the middle of November they were to have claimed 13 Italian aircraft for the loss of only one fighter in combat. With the arrival of this new reinforcement, the British Mediterranean Fleet launched an air strike on the island of Rhodes during early September, but this time the defending CR42s of

162ª Squadriglia were able to catch a formation of Fairey Swordfish biplane bombers from *Eagle* and shoot down four of them.

As already mentioned, the failure of the Italian aircraft industry to produce a really viable dive-bomber had led the Air Ministry in Rome to order a number of Junkers Ju87Bs from Germany, and supplies of these aircraft had now arrived. The initial unit to be equipped with them was 96° Gruppo, which moved to Sicily to put its new equipment into use. On September 5th five of the new bombers, well-escorted by 2ª Squadra CR42s, dive-bombed the island without loss. It was the signal for a renewal of the assault, and on the 7th ten SM79s and 18 CR42s raided Valetta, a week later seven more hitting the port again. On September 15th, the day on which the Battle of Britain reached its climax over London, 12 Ju87s escorted by 18 fighters, including the MC200s of 6° Gruppo on their first operational mission, attacked Hal Far airfield.

The raid was repeated on the 17th, but this time one Ju87 and a CR42 were lost; ten days later the final attack of the month was launched by 20 bombers. There were only two raids of note during October, since Italian attention was directed elsewhere, preparing for the imminent invasion of Greece. On the 8th five SM79s attacked the seaplane depot at Kalafrana, one bomber being shot down by defending fighters, and on the 27th nine CR42s engaged two British patrols over the island, claiming two fighters shot down. On November 2nd however, 20 SM79s of 34° Stormo, fully escorted, launched a heavy raid on Valetta and Takali.

The British were now planning an audacious attack on the main fleet base at Taranto, inside the 'heel' of the Italian 'boot'. In the west, *Ark Royal* had returned from a swift trip to England, now also with Fulmars aboard, and on November 9th launched an air strike on airfields in Sardinia to divert attention from the approach of the British Mediterranean Fleet from the east. *Illustrious*'s Fulmars were kept constantly in the air to ensure that shadowers failed to report their apparent direction and destination, a task which they fulfilled more than adequately, nine searching aircraft, SM79s, Z506Bs and Z501s, being claimed shot down by them between the 8th and the 13th. The attack itself was carried out during the night of November 11–12th with great success, and due to the activities of the defending fighters, the Regia Aeronautica was unable to take any worthwhile part in these events. The fleet then withdrew for another series of strikes on

Aegean bases, where three Rhodes-based CR42s were claimed shot down by Fulmars on the 28th.

Meanwhile over Malta 15 SM79s returned on the 23rd to bomb Takali, the escort meeting ten Hurricanes and claiming four shot down. December however brought only one more raid, when five SM79s of 34° Stormo again attacked Takali airfield. During the seven months of attacks on the island the Regia Aeronautica had lost 18 bombers and nine fighters to defending fighters, five bombers and three fighters to anti-aircraft fire, while a further 187 bombers and seven fighters had been damaged. Claims against the British operating from the island totalled 40 fighters and 26 bombers, with 13 and nine respectively probably destroyed—figures well in excess of actual losses suffered.

The Attack on Greece

By late October all was ready for the attack on Greece, which was to be launched across that country's north-western frontier with Albania. The Aeronautica dell'Albania and the 4ª Zona Aerea Territoriale had been greatly reinforced for the venture, the former moving its headquarters to Argirocastro, and the latter being expanded into a full Squadra, with headquarters moved from Bari to Brindisi. The Order of Battle of these Air Armies when operations began on the 28th October 1940 was as follows:—

Aeronautica dell'Albania

38° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81	Valona
105° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM79	Tirana
160° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR32	Drenara (two squadriglie only)
72° Gruppo OA	Meridionali Ro37	Three squadriglie at Coritza, Valona and Argirocastro.

Early in November the following units joined the Aeronautica dell'Albania:—

104° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM79	Tirana
24° Gruppo CT	Fiat G50	Berat (two squadriglie only)
154° Gruppo CT	Fiat G50	Berat (two squadriglie only)
150° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR42	Three squadriglie at Tirana, Valona and Argirocastro.

4ª Squadra Aerea

35° Stormo BM	Cant Z506B	Brindisi
37° Stormo BT	Savoia SM81 & Fiat BR20	Lecce
47° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Grottaglie
50° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Brindisi

96° Gruppo BaT	Junkers Ju87B	Lecce
2° Gruppo CT	Fiat G50 & CR42	Grottaglie and Bari

Reinforcements early in November included:—

41° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Brindisi
372ª Squadriglia	Macchi MC200	Brindisi

Against this combined total of 380 first line aircraft, most of them relatively modern, the tiny Royal Hellenic Air Force could muster a total of 149 aircraft of very mixed parentage and age. From the start the Italian formations ranged over the front, over Central Greece, and over the Greek Islands, virtually at will, though bad weather cut sorties very severely on several days. During an attack by 4ª Squadra Z1007bis bombers and CR42s on November 2nd, Greek PZL P-24 fighters intercepted, the defending pilots claiming to have shot down three of the bombers. Next day the first British aircraft arrived in Greece, the government of that country having accepted the assistance of Royal Air Force units, although they were reluctant to allow an Expeditionary Force into the country for fear of provoking the Germans into joining the Italians in their invasion.

On the ground all was not going well, as, following the initial incursions, the Greeks had counter-attacked strongly and driven the Italians back into Albania, following them across the frontier into this country. In support of the Greek army, British Blenheims were launched on their first, unescorted, raids over Albania on November 6th, but defending CR42s and G50s intercepted these, damaging all three bombers. Next day the RAF was back, this time a formation of six Vickers Wellingtons attacking Valona. In daylight, and without escorts, these big bombers were sitting ducks for the defenders, CR42s and G50s again attacking and shooting down two, two more being damaged.

Both Greek and British air units struck at Koritza on the 14th, RHAF Blenheims and Battles attacking the airfield where a number of aircraft were hit on the ground; virtually the whole Greek fighter force swept over the area, engaging in several combats during which they claimed ten Italian aircraft shot down. British Blenheims also raided Koritza, but again fell foul of the defenders, two being shot down and one damaged.

Throughout November and into December small formations of Blenheims continued to appear over Albania, but these were frequently

intercepted by the defending fighters, which continued to maintain the upper hand and take a steady toll of them. On November 18th the first British Gladiators arrived, on a day during which the Greek fighter force again rampaged over Western Macedonia, claiming five Italian bombers and two fighters for the loss of three of their own. Next day nine British Gladiators flew their first patrol, attacking several smaller formations of CR42s and G50s, claiming nine shot down and several probables. One formation of five CR42s lost four of their number without being able to make a single claim in return, and the pilots of the G50s though undoubtedly able to outrun the Gloster biplanes in their faster machines, quickly found it most unwise to engage the nimble fighter in a dogfight.

In order to improve this situation, on November 26th 373ª Squadriglia CT with MC200s moved to Bari and the similarly-equipped 374ª Squadriglia to Grottaglie, to begin operations over Greece. Next day 374ª was joined by the SM79s of 42° Gruppo, and on December 6th the second Ju87 unit, 97° Gruppo, arrived at Lecce. Finally, on December 7th a further MC200 squadriglia, 307ª, flew in to Foggia.

During December there were to be a number of clashes between CR42s and Gladiators, both sides tending greatly to overestimate the effects of their attacks. In the whirling combats of 20 or 30 biplanes over the rough and rugged mountains of the Greco–Albanian frontier, it was all too easy for two or three pilots to fire at the same aircraft and all to think they had shot it down, or for a fighter spinning down towards the peaks and ravines below in order to escape, to appear doomed.

One such combat had taken place on November 28th, but on December 2nd it was the army co-operation Ro37s that fell foul of the British fighters, which claimed three shot down. Next day Italian fighters claimed four PZL P-24s in a succession of actions over the front, and on the 4th came another big clash with the Gladiators, the CR42s claiming three for the loss of two, while the British claimed seven and two probables for no loss!

On the 14th SM79s had their first clash with British fighters on this front, one bomber being hit, but gunners shooting down one Gladiator in return. Six days later on December 20th a formation of SM79s was again attacked by Gladiators, and on this occasion one of the bombers was shot down. The enemy fighters then attacked SM81s of 38° Stormo, all of which were heavily damaged, but all managed to return

to their base; the Gladiators claimed to have shot down two. Next day CR42s escorted BR20s over the front, once again meeting the Gladiators in a heavy dogfight; nine British fighters were claimed by the Italians for two losses, while the British claimed eight for two losses; this was the first appearance over Greece of BR20s. On the 22nd the MC200s were first in action, engaging nine Blenheims over Albania and shooting down two in flames, damaging five more.

On the ground the Greeks had been brought to a halt by the end of November, and in the grip of bitter winter weather the front became stalemated. Gradually weather conditions began reducing the level of air activity, and by the end of the year this was considerably down. On December 30th two Z506B floatplanes on reconnaissance along the coast near the Greek port of Preveza, were intercepted by British Blenheim fighters and both were shot down. Next day nine Blenheim bombers raided Valona, but once more fighters intercepted these and shot one down.

The Loss of Cyrenaica

Early on December 9th, 1940 British Commonwealth forces struck suddenly in Egypt, supported by increased numbers of Hurricane fighters and Blenheims, and the forward Italian troops were at once driven back. Heavy fighting in the air began forthwith, three of five SM79s being shot down by Hurricanes, while CR42s also clashed with these aircraft. By evening 12 Italian aircraft had been lost, although an optimistic 18 claims against the RAF were entered. By the 11th Sidi Barrani was again in British hands, and their armour was approaching the Halfaya Pass, overruning Buq Buq. Reinforcements were at once despatched to the Regia Aeronautica, the SM79s of 42° Gruppo being sent over from Grottaglie.

At the start of the fighting the Italians had available to them some 378 aircraft (discounting the 66 Saharan Caproni Ghiblis), and of these 271 were immediately serviceable; they included 129 bombers, mainly SM79s, 139 CR42s, 53 attack aircraft—CR32s and Ba65s—and sundry other types. During December 153 more were to be sent over, including 64 SM79s, 36 CR42s, 46 G50s and seven Ba65s.

On December 13th the Italian CR42s achieved a real success, attacking a formation of Australian Gladiators and claiming six shot down; five in fact failed to return. Later on this date Hurricanes engaged SM79s an CR42s, and by the end of the day six more British

aircraft had been claimed, though six Italian machines were lost. On the 14th SM79s were again attacked by Hurricanes, which claimed seven destroyed. A large formation of CR42s engaged nine Blenheims bombing Bardia, shooting down three and damaging all the rest.

By December 15th however, all Italian forces were out of Egypt and five of the seven front line divisions had been smashed, 38,000 prisoners having been taken by the British. 9° Stormo SM79s escorted by CR42s were attacked by Hurricanes on this date, three of the bombers being shot down, the Stormo commander, a gruppo commander and a squadriglia commander all being lost; the British claimed six, and five of the Hurricanes were claimed in return. On this date 23 SM79s of 34° Stormo arrived from Sicily, together with 23 CR42s of 23° Gruppo.

Battles between Hurricanes and formations of SM79s and CR42s continued throughout the rest of the month, Gladiators and Blenheims also being engaged regularly in combats with the Italian fighters; claims on both sides were frequent, but on a reduced scale compared with the first days of the offensive. Hurricanes also now began to do a fair amount of strafing in the area of the front line. On December 30th the first G50 monoplanes arrived, 20° Gruppo which had just returned from Belgium, flying in from Grottaglie.

The new year of 1941 brought a renewal of heavy fighting when Australian troops began their attack on Bardia on January 3rd, and on this date a single Hurricane shot down three of five SM79s which were bombing British ships engaged in shelling the port; these bombers were part of a force of 13 from 34° and 41° Stormi which were taking part in this mission. A lone CR42 attacked two Blenheims and claimed both shot down, though in the event only one failed to return. The fall of Bardia lost Italy a further 45,000 men, 5,000 guns and over 100 tanks.

British fighters now began patrolling over the Regia Aeronautica's landing grounds, making operations for the Italian aircraft more difficult still. Another CR42 gruppo, 18°, now arrived in Libya, also having recently returned from Belgium from where an Italian Air Army had flown a few raids over England during the closing days of the Battle of Britain. During this period two more G50 Gruppi, 2° and 155° arrived; G50s fought their first combat with Hurricanes on the 6th, two being claimed shot down by the British fighters. A new and damaging departure on the 8th was the first of a series of long-range

strafing attacks by Hurricanes on airfields well behind the lines; in an attack on Martuba a dozen SM79s were shot-up, six of them being burnt.

The RAF was being further weakened at this time however, more Blenheim units being pulled out to go to Greece, and these would shortly be followed by one of the Hurricane squadrons. On January 21st Australian infantry attacked the fortified port of Tobruk, which fell the following day with the loss of 30,000 more men. Three days later on the 25th the G50s had their first successful combat when they attacked a number of Gladiators, claiming four shot down; one was actually lost.

By the end of January Derna too had fallen to the British forces, but now the first units of the German Luftwaffe arrived in the Libyan province of Tripolitania, having flown in from Sicily where they had already been operating for some days, as will be related shortly. These units included III Gruppe of Zerstroergeschwader 26 with Messerschmitt Bf110C twin-engined long-range fighters, together with 2 Staffel from the Geschwader's I Gruppe, and the Ju87s of II Gruppe, Stukageschwader 3. It was, however, to be some days before these new arrivals would be ready to take part in operations, and in the meantime small clashes between Italian and British fighters continued to take place; but this time the SM79s had ceased to operate over the front by day, though at night they joined SM81s in attacking British lines of communication and ports.

On February 3rd Italian fighters intercepted a German reconnaissance Junkers Ju88 of 1(F)/121 over the port of Tripoli, and shot it down under the impression that it was a Blenheim; this was the first Luftwaffe aircraft to be lost over North Africa. The following day the British armoured columns cut across the Cyrenaican 'bulge', along the track through Mechili, reaching the coast to the south of Benghazi next day, and effectively cutting off the rest of the Italian Tenth Army from its bases in Tripolitania.

In the air CR42s of 151° Gruppo shot down a Blenheim, but return fire damaged the fighter of Serg Masenti, and he was obliged to land at Barce. Mar Pil Giovanni Accorsi flew a 'hack' Caproni Ca133 transport to the area in an attempt to fly him out, escorted by a number of the unit's fighters, but over Barce they were attacked by Hurricanes, which despite the loss of one of their number to the CR42s, shot down the Caproni and one of the escorting fighters, flown by

Capt Guglielmo Chiarini. Both Chiarini and Accorsi were killed; they were both recipients of the Medaglio d'Oro award, and Chiarini was one of the leading Italian fighter pilots in the desert campaign, having been credited with five victories in five months of combat, together with shares in several others.

The trapped Tenth Army attacked at Beda Fomm on February 6th in a day-long tank battle, but were unable to break through, and suffered heavy losses. The Army Commander was killed fighting alongside his men, and his second in command was captured; by the end of the day another 20,000 men, 190 guns and 120 tanks had been lost to bring the First Libyan Campaign to a close at a total cost to the Italians of 130,000 men, 1,300 guns, 400 tanks and about 150 aircraft.

Aircraft losses in combat reported by the Regia Aeronautica were just about half the number claimed by the RAF, but more than 90 aircraft were abandoned by them during the retreat, either due to unserviceability, or to unrepaired damage suffered in combat or through strafing. More than 50 SM79s were lost, 30 of them on the ground, and nearly as many CR42s. The campaign saw the end of the front line service of the Breda Ba65, due mainly to the losses on the ground; the Regia Aeronautica had been badly hurt. Its own claims totalled 62 British aircraft shot down by fighters and 16 by bombers during the recent fighting, together with a number of probables, to bring total claims in North Africa to 197 by the fighters and 49 by the bombers, figures very much in excess of actual British losses.

The Luftwaffe Arrives in Sicily

The reverses of the Italians in the Libyan Desert were giving Adolf Hitler, Führer of Greater Germany, some causes for concern by late December 1940, not relieved by the somewhat precarious position of other Italian elements in Albania, where the Greek counter-invasion attempt had come to a halt. A British success in the Mediterranean, and particularly in the Balkans could well threaten the southern flank of his forces in their planned attack on Soviet Russia. Unwilling to become embroiled in the Middle East, he nonetheless permitted the despatch of a small air fleet, Fliegerkorps X, and two panzer divisions of the Wehrmacht on a temporary basis, to restore the position of his ally in North Africa.

However, if British supplies were to be delayed in reaching Commonwealth forces in Libya and Greece, and a long campaign prevented, it

was necessary first to close the Mediterranean to the British as a supply route, and here Malta was the key. This island if allowed to operate its aircraft, ships and submarines unchecked, could also seriously threaten the supply route to the forces being committed to the African continent. During December 65 Junkers Ju52/3m transports flew down to Foggia carrying technicians and supplies to prepare bases for the Luftwaffe, and the bulk of Fliegerkorps X was due to arrive the following month.

Early in January 1941 information was received that a substantial convoy was already en route from Britain, bound for Alexandria via Gibraltar and Malta, and advance elements of the new air fleet were despatched with all possible haste. I and II Gruppen of Stukageschwader 2 with 54 Ju87Bs from France, II/KG 26 with 32 Heinkel He111s from Norway, III/ZG 26 with 24 Bf110Cs, and a reconnaissance Staffel, 1(F)/121, with 10 Junkers Ju88s, arriving in Sicily just before the convoy came within range.

The Regia Aeronautica units on the island had been much reduced due to recent events in Libya and Greece, comprising at this time 30° Stormo BT with SM79s, 279ª Squadriglia Aerosiluranti with SM79sil torpedo-bombers, and 1° Stormo CT with six squadriglie of MC200s and CR42s. To join this force the dozen Ju87Bs of 96° Gruppo returned to the island from Lecce.

On January 9th 1° Stormo MC200s carried out a fighter-bomber raid on Malta, but defending Hurricanes claimed to have shot four of them down. On this date however, reconnaissance showed the convoy, which had initially been escorted by ships of Force 'H', to now be under the care of the British Mediterranean Fleet, including the aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, and the battleships *Warspite* and *Valiant*. Next day therefore, a number of attacks were laid on; early in the afternoon 18 He111s of II/KG 26 bombed without effect, but some two and a half hours later 13 Ju87Bs of II/StG 2 led by Major Enneccerus approached the ships and dived from 12,000 feet to plant six 1,000lb bombs right on the carrier's deck, three more damaging her with near misses. The ship's Fulmars were unable to intercept, for they had just dived to low level to intercept torpedo-carrying SM79s of 32° Stormo from Sardinia, two of which were shot down. Desperately badly damaged, the carrier almost sank, but damage control parties managed to save her, and the battleships escorted her towards Valetta harbour, Malta.

The Luftwaffe was soon back, 14 Ju87Bs of I/StG 2 attacking just over an hour later, but not inflicting any further damage. The ship's Fulmars had flown to Malta to refuel, and returned to cover the vessel, one of the attacking Ju87s being shot down. Within the hour II/KG 26 was back, 14 He111s again bombing from medium altitude. Next day the attack was pushed home once more, 35 Ju87Bs escorted by 13 Bf110s again dive-bombing the ship, although this time two bombers were lost. Minutes later He111s also put in a further raid. Meanwhile II/StG 2, led by a 'pathfinder' He111, went after the rest of the Mediterranean Fleet as it headed for Alexandria with the convoy, attacking the cruiser *Southampton* at extreme range, and sinking her.

A further convoy was now approaching Egypt from the south, up the Red Sea, and on January 17th, it was reported to be about to enter the Suez Canal. The port of Suez was just about within range of Benghazi, which at that time was still in Italian hands, and one Staffel of II/KG 26 was ordered to attack. During the afternoon the He111s flew over to Benghazi, but three collided when landing. As dusk fell eight Heinkels took off singly, four to approach the canal from each end. The canal was reached, but no convoy was to be found, and as the bombers turned for the long return flight they encountered a severe headwind, only one managing to reach Benghazi, the others all force-landing in British-held territory. The surviving aircraft searched for the others for some days, and on the 21st picked up the crew of one of them, including Major Martin Harlinghausen, Fliegerkorps X's Chief of Staff, who had personally accompanied the attack as an observer. It was a most costly failure, seven He111s being lost, and three crews being taken prisoner.

Meanwhile *Illustrious* had reached harbour in Valetta, and urgent temporary repairs were begun on her. Fliegerkorps X had been reinforced by the first contingents of two Gruppen of Junkers Ju88A bombers, and on January 16th a big raid was organised against the island, 17 Ju88s escorted by 20 Bf110s and 44 Ju87s escorted by ten MC200s and ten CR42s attacking the carrier in Valetta harbour. Fighters rose to the defence, joining with the anti-aircraft guns in claiming about ten of the attackers shot down. Two days later 12 Ju88s, 51 Ju87s, 17 Bf110s and nine MC200s bombed the airfields at Hal Far and Luqa, the defenders on this occasion claiming 11; the attack on the carrier was resumed on the 19th, 42 Ju87s with five Bf110s and 10 CR42s, and 30 Ju88s with 12 Bf110s, ten CR42s and

eight MC200s this time attacking; 19 were claimed shot down. Of the 40 Axis aircraft claimed in these three attacks, a large percentage were credited to the guns, and it is clear that this estimate was very considerably above the actual losses; however, final figures are uncertain, though Fliegerkorps X lost at least five Ju88s and five Ju87s in the attacks, and 2 Staffel of I/StG 1 in one attack lost all their pilots except the Staffelkapitän. Four hits were achieved on the carrier during the two attacks, but failed to penetrate the armoured deck, and on the 23rd she was able to sail for the United States where she would undergo many months of repair. Although the defending Hurricanes and Fulmars had been most persistent, the large fighter escorts had not enjoyed outstanding success, the Bf110s of ZG 26 claiming two of the British fighters, and the Italian fighters of 1° Stormo two more.

The situation in Libya now led to several changes, and on January 20th the Ju87s of 96° Gruppo were despatched to Tripoli, followed ten days later by some of Fliegerkorps X's Bf110s and Ju87s, as has already been related. However, as 96° Gruppo left, 156° Gruppo was activated in Sicily with CR42s.

The strength of Fliegerkorps X was soon built up again, and the first raid of February 1941 occurred on the first day of the month. On the 9th a Staffel of Messerschmitt Bf109Es arrived in Sicily, the first of these fine fighters to see service in the Mediterranean with the Luftwaffe. The unit was 7 Staffel of Jagdgeschwader 26 from France, and was led by Oblt Joachim Müncheberg, one of the leading Luftwaffe 'aces' of the Battle of Britain; he claimed his first Hurricane over Malta on the 12th, and thereafter life was to be much more difficult for the defending fighters so long as his unit remained.

A further big raid on the island was carried out on February 26th, 38 Ju87s, 12 Ju88s, ten He111s, ten Bf110s and a substantial escort of single-engined fighters attacking the airfields where six Wellington bombers were destroyed and seven badly damaged. Defending fighters claimed two victories and the guns five, with 11 more probables claimed, but three Hurricanes were shot down.

Fliegerkorps X now included in Sicily two Gruppen of Ju88s, II and III/LG 1, two Gruppen of Ju87s, a Gruppe of He111s and an additional Staffel for torpedo-carrying, two Staffeln of Bf110s, one for night-fighting, and a Staffel of Heinkel He59 floatplanes and Dornier Do24 flyingboats at Syracuse, for air-sea rescue duties; just across on the mainland, at Reggio Calabria, was a Gruppe of Ju 52/3m

transports. This substantial force again attacked on March 1st, 60 escorted bombers destroying four aircraft on the ground at Hal Far, while the escort shot down one Hurricane; a further big raid was made on the 5th, and on the 7th Bf109s of 7/JG 26 strafed St Paul's Bay, where they damaged a Sunderland flyingboat, and then shot down a Martin Maryland reconnaissance-bomber and a Hurricane. Three days later they again strafed St Paul's Bay, hitting two Sunderlands at anchor, one of which sank. On the 23rd another big raid was launched, the defenders claiming 12 Ju87s shot down, but the island was no longer tenable for other than the defending fighters, and all remaining offensive aircraft—Wellingtons, Sunderlands, and Royal Navy torpedo-bombers —were withdrawn. Fliegerkorps X had almost achieved its first aim, and for the time being Malta's teeth were drawn

April was a quieter month for the defenders as the Germans prepared to withdraw units for operations in the Balkans, and then against Russia. A new Italian SM79 torpedo-bomber squadriglia, 278ª, had been formed in Sicily in February, but early in April the resident 279ª Squadriglia equipped for similar duties, left for the Aegean. On April 1st, however, the surviving CR42s of 23° Gruppo from Libya flew over to the island, where they were absorbed into 156° Gruppo, and on the 25th 10° Stormo BT with SM79s also moved to Sicily.

7/JG 26 moved to Taranto on April 6th to undertake some strafing attacks over Greece as the Germans launched their attack on this country, but they were back two days later, and continued to make sweeps over Malta, taking a steady toll of the defending fighters. Early in May this toll rose, the Bf109s shooting down three Hurricanes in one day, two of them falling to Müncheberg. The Staffel was then joined briefly by III/JG 27, also Bf109-equipped, which had just been taking part in the fighting over Greece, and in the period May 6th–20th, this unit was to claim five victories over Malta before leaving for the fast-approaching attack on Russia.

On May 6th, the first day on which III/JG 27 joined 7/JG 26 on operations, He111s were escorted over Malta, and four Hurricanes were shot down. Two days later two British aircraft carriers approached the island from Gibraltar, HMS *Formidable* carrying Hurricane reinforcements, while *Ark Royal* provided escort. The ships were attacked by Ju87s and SM79s, but escaped damage, defending Fulmars claiming three of the former and two of the latter. It was as well for the British that their reinforcements came though, as the maurauding Bf109s

continued to peck away at the Hurricanes, shooting down these aircraft on the 13th, 14th and 15th of the month.

The headquarters of 43° Stormo, together with 99° Gruppo, equipped with BR20s, arrived in Sicily on May 7th, the first of these aircraft to reach the island, and their first attack on Malta was launched on the 22nd. Responsibility for Malta was now to revert to the Italians, as by the end of May all Luftwaffe units had left for the Eastern Front with the exception of a single Ju88 reconnaissance Staffel, and 7/JG 26. This latter unit wished farewell to the island also at the start of June, flying over to join Fliegerführer Afrika in Libya. In its short stay it had claimed 42 victories over Malta, 20 of them by Müncheberg, whose personal score had risen to 43.

Rommel Retakes Cyrenaica

On February 12th, 1941 General Erwin Rommel arrived in Tripoli to take command of the German land forces moving to Africa—the Afrika Korps; two days later the first armoured units also arrived in Tripoli harbour. Luftwaffe units were already in action, attacking British troops dug in in the Marsa Brega area, and already a Ju87 had been shot down by anti-aircraft fire and a Bf110 forcelanded in British territory; the first German aircraft to fall to a British fighter in Africa, a Ju88 of II/LG 1 operating from Sicily, was shot down on February 15th, but the first big combat occurred on the 17th when 12 I/StG 1 Ju87s were attacked by Hurricanes while dive-bombing British positions at the front, the fighters claiming eight shot down. Two days later Ju87s of II/StG 2, escorted by Bf110s of III/ZG 26, were also engaged by Hurricanes which shot down one of each, but lost two of their own aircraft to the escorting Messerschmitts.

On the ground German troops made their first contact with British outposts on the 20th, and at the same time modern Italian mechanised and armoured divisions also began ariving in Tripoli. Despite this, the British army was greatly weakened by the despatch of an expeditionary force to Greece on March 5th, and further RAF units were also sent over. Other units of both army and air force were withdrawn to Egypt to rest and re-equip, leaving the forces at the front critically thin on the ground.

In the air there was little more than brief skirmishing during March, but the Axis were further reinforced; 2(H)/14, a tactical reconnaissance unit equipped with Henschel Hs126s, Bf109s and Bf110s arrived, as did some BR20s of 43° Stormo, these replacing the SM81s of 54°

Gruppo for night attacks on Benghazi and Agedabia, a duty on which they were sometimes to be joined by Luftwaffe He111s, of KG 26. By the end of the month elements of no less than four Stukagruppen were operating in Africa alongside Stab/StG 3, these being I, II and III/StG 1, and II/StG 2. The aircraft of these units were divided between Libya and Sicily.

With sufficient forces now available to undertake some active probing, on March 31st Rommel launched a reconnaissance in strength, which immediately caused the British front to crumble, and outlying units to be withdrawn towards Agedabia. In the air a Bf110 of 7/ZG 26 was shot down by Hurricanes, and other fighters of this latter type engaged a formation of five 43° Stormo BR20s, claiming to have damaged three.

Deciding on April 2nd that the British were definitely in retreat, Rommel advanced into Benghazi, the port swiftly falling to his forces; the attack threw the British into a full general retreat, and this the Luftwaffe was quick to exploit, Ju87s attacking regularly. Eight of II/StG 2's bombers, escorted by eight Bf110s were engaged by Hurricanes on the 3rd, the British claiming five Bf110s and three Ju87s. On the 5th Barce was the target, but II/StG 2 was twice intercepted when operating unescorted, a total of 14 Ju87s being claimed for the loss of two Hurricanes. III/ZG 26's Bf110s strafed a British landing ground in the forward area, hitting five Blenheims, two Lysanders and a Hurricane.

Troops from Egypt were landed at Tobruk on the 7th to prepare for the defence of the port, but next day most of the remaining British armour was destroyed at Derna and Mechili. By the 10th Axis columns had reached the Tobruk perimeter, and the port was swiftly invested, becoming a fortress; one depleted British fighter squadron remained within the defended area to provide a modicum of protection in the air.

Tobruk now came under heavy air attack by German and Italian Ju87s and their fighter escorts by day, and by medium bombers at night, BR20s, SM79s and He111s all attacking after dusk. An early Stuka raid on the 11th cost II/StG 1 three Ju 87s to the anti-aircraft defences, but next day a really big raid was launched, 70 Ju87s and Bf110s, escorted by CR42s of 18° Gruppo and G50s of 155° Gruppo arrived overhead. Two G50s were shot down, but the Hurricane responsible was also destroyed, while another went down to a Bf110. Three Ju87s and a Hs126 were claimed by the defenders. Later in the

day 20 Ju87s and Bf110s, eight G50s and two CR42s returned, and another Hurricane was shot down; Italian CR42s claimed a total of four Hurricanes in the two raids. Three more Ju87s were claimed by the defenders, II/StG 2 and III/StG 1 losing at least three crews during the day; a Bf110 was also shot down.

A couple of setbacks to Axis reinforcement then occurred; on the 15th a Hurricane caught four Ju52/3ms just as they were landing and destroyed them all, while next day destroyers from Malta intercepted a convoy off the North African coast and wiped it out completely. The ships were carrying a substantial proportion of a German armoured division.

On April 18th I Gruppe of JG 27 arrived in Libya, the first Bf109E fighters to reach Africa. One Staffel of the Gruppe had flown a few uneventful missions from Sicily during March, while the other two had taken a small part in the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. Now however, this unit, which had also operated during the Battles of France and Britain during 1940, was to begin taking a most notable part in the African war, flying its first sorties over the Egyptian frontier next day. This mission set the unit off to a good start, four Hurricanes being claimed for no loss, though later in the day one of the Gruppe's Messerschmitts was to be shot down in the same area by a British fighter.

Two days later I/JG 27 made its first flight over Tobruk, but here two of its fighters were shot down, together with three of the Ju87s which the unit was escorting, only one Hurricane being claimed in return. On the 22nd 12 Bf109s returned, sharing with 12 G50s the escort of 30 Ju87s. This time the Axis fighters were unable to inflict any damage on the elusive defenders, who in their turn claimed three Bf109s, three G50s and two Ju87s. Most Italian fighters were based further back at this time, defending the ports of Benghazi and Derna, and over these areas during the month they were successful in destroying several Blenheims which attempted to attack in small numbers.

The final big air battle over Tobruk occurred on April 23rd, 30 Bf109s of I/JG 27, together with 10 Bf110s of III/ZG 26, escorting 20 Ju87s to attack. The German fighters were this time able to shoot down four of the Hurricanes which rose to intercept, but two Bf109s and four Ju87s were claimed by the defenders. In the evening 20 Ju87s and 20 Bf109s returned to batter the tired defenders still further, but again a Bf109 was lost, this time for no claim. The defenders had been worn right down however, and on the 25th the last Hurricane fighter left, only a handful of fighter-reconnaissance aircraft remaining. During

this day a Bf110 shot down a Hurricane from Egypt, which was intruding over the front lines, but next day another of these Hurricanes turned the tables and brought down a Bf110.

At the end of April Rommel launched a further attack on Tobruk by his ground forces, supported by the air units, but was unable to penetrate the defences. On May 1st Bf109s of I/JG 27 shot down four Hurricanes which attempted to intervene in the defence, but on the 2nd Rommel gave up the attack on the fortress for the time being, and moved his forces forward to occupy Sollum, Capuzzo and Halfaya Pass on the frontier. Here he planned to consolidate, and to allow supplies to catch up with his rapid advance. There were various small skirmishes in the air during early May, but the main event was the arrival at Alexandria on the 12th of a substantial Allied convoy, code-named 'Tiger', which brought considerable reinforcements of both tanks and Hurricanes for the British. The position in Africa was fast approaching stalemate.

The Balkans Erupt

In Greece at the beginning of 1941 the winter had inflicted a position of stalemate on the Italian and Greek armies on the Albanian frontier also, while the harsh weather conditions had greatly restricted and reduced the activities of the opposing air forces. Blenheims of the RAF were still appearing over Valona and other Albanian centres on infrequent occasions, and the defending fighters continued to react to these with vigour, several more being shot down during the month. On January 20th a small formation of four Cant Z1007bis bombers attacked Athens, but were intercepted by both Gladiators and Blenheims of the RAF, one bomber being shot down and a second damaged; the gunners in the Cants claimed three fighters shot down, one Gladiator actually crashing in flames.

More and better bombers were becoming available to the Regia Aeronautica to operate over Greece at this time, 35° Stormo converting from Z506B floatplanes to Z1007bis's, while 105° Gruppo with SM79s moved to Bari to join 4ª Squadra. However, late in the month 41° Gruppo with SM79s and 96° Gruppo with Ju87s moved to Libya. On January 28th ten Z1007bis again ventured over enemy territory, this time to bomb targets near the front. RAF fighters again intercepted them, one bomber being shot down; three fighters were once more claimed, but on this occasion none were actually lost.

A considerable improvement in the weather during February allowed a great increase in activity, and a number of combats occurred in which both sides appear to have considerably overclaimed. BR20s and CR42s on a raid on February 9th were engaged by Greek PZL P-24s and British Gladiators, the escorting Fiats claiming seven of these shot down for the loss of two CR42s. The Allied pilots on the other hand claimed seven Italian fighters and two bombers for the loss of two of their own aircraft. Next day a big force of ten SM79s, ten BR20s and five Z1007bis, escorted by 20 CR42s, attacked Allied airfields near the front, British Gladiators claiming an SM79 and a BR20 without loss.

On the 13th a dozen Blenheims appeared over Tepelene, having lost their fighter escort in cloud, and G50s were quick to exploit this, shooting down three of the bombers and badly damaging two more. However, shortly after this the first RAF Hurricanes arrived in Greece, changing the situation drastically in favour of the Allies, since this fighter outperformed both the CR42 and the G50. On the 20th the Hurricanes first appeared, escorting Blenheims to bomb Berat airfield. G50s intercepted, claiming one fighter and one bomber shot down; the Hurricanes claimed four of the Italian fighters for the loss of one Blenheim. 15 more G50s followed the British formation back to the front, where 15 patrolling Gladiators attacked them; the G50s claimed ten of these for one loss, the Gladiators counter-claiming three G50s and some probables without loss!

By this time the weather was improving fast, and combats occurred almost daily. Hurricanes and Blenheims again appeared over Albania on the 27th, this time attacking Valona; CR42s intercepted, badly damaging five Blenheims, but the British escort claimed seven shot down, with two more seen to collide. Next day combats over the front line between G50s, CR24s, SM79s, BR20s, Hurricanes, Gladiators and PZL P-24s continued throughout the day. When stock was taken the Allies claimed 26 shot down, seven of them bombers, and nine more probables, while Italian fighters also made substantial claims. On neither of these two days were Italian losses reported to be anything approaching the claimed figures; why such overclaiming apparently took place in Greece is by no means clear, particularly having regard to the relatively experienced British units involved, though the true answer will probably never be known.

March saw much more fierce fighting over Greece and Albania as reinforcements for both sides continued to arrive. On the 3rd Hurricanes

and Greek fighters claimed seven unescorted Z1007bis bombers in the Corfu area, and next day when Blenheims attacked Italian warships which had come close inshore to shell targets in the Himare area, escorting Hurricanes were engaged by 24 CR24s, which claimed six British aircraft for the loss of two; the Hurricanes in their turn claimed eight CR42s for one loss. A series of combats took place over the front on March 9th, 11th, 13th and 14th, G50s, MC200s and CR42s fighting Gladiators and Hurricanes, both sides either escorting bombers or patrolling, and again heavy claims were made; on the 13th British claims for ten CR42s without loss were matched by the five claims by MC200 and CR42 pilots for the loss of two CR42s. Probably the nearest to reasonable claiming occurred on the 14th when in a big battle between CR42s, G50s, MC200s and the Z1007bis and BR20 bombers which they were escorting, and attacking Gladiators and Hurricanes, seven, including at least one BR20, were claimed by the British for the loss of a Hurricane and a Gladiator, while Italian fighters claimed two Hurricanes and two Gladiators for the loss of two MC200s.

By this time 371° Squadriglia with MC200s had moved to Valona, and 22° Gruppo, its G50s now replaced with MC200s, had arrived at Tirana; 150° Gruppo was steadily replacing its CR42s with the Macchi fighters, and 38° Stormo was exchanging its SM81s for BR20s. Tirana also saw the arrival of 238ª Squadriglia with Ju87s and 114ª Squadriglia with Ro37s, while in Southern Italy 4ª Squadra welcomed 73ª Squadriglia with MC200s at Brindisi.

Since the return of better weather, Wellingtons had resumed their nocturnal attacks on Albania, now joined by Royal Navy Swordfish. At first little could be done against these attacks, though attempts to intercept were made by the fighters. One of these finally achieved success on the night of March 16th, a Wellington being shot down. The Italians then launched a surprise attack by two formations of G50s on the forward Allied air base in the Paramythia valley on March 22nd; the first formation drew off the defending Gladiators, the second then going in to strafe, destroyed two Blenheims and a Wellington on the ground. In a reprisal attack on the G50s' base at Berat next day, Blenheims, Hurricanes and Gladiators were intercepted by 20 of the Fiat fighters, the British escort claiming two of them shot down. Hurricanes returned on April 5th to strafe, two G50s being claimed on the ground and two in the air. Italian raids on Southern

and central Greece were also intercepted by Hurricanes, these claiming three bombers over Larissa on the 3rd and four Z1007bis over Athens on the 6th.

On this latter date however, Germany entered the war in the Balkans. Already in the spring of 1941 Adolf Hitler was unhappy with the situation in Greece as his planned attack on Russia approached, but now it was the people of Yugoslavia who brought matters to a head. Neighbouring Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary had by this time come greatly under German influence, and had become signatories of the Axis Tripartite Pact; great pressure was placed upon the government of Yugoslavia to do likewise, and on March 25th the Pact had been signed in Vienna. At once the population protested violently and within two days a military coup threw out Prince Paul, who was acting as Regent, together with his advisers, the young King Peter being brought to the throne and the Pact repudiated. Hitler now knew that to safeguard his southern flank he must occupy Yugoslavia, and to secure the Balkans and prevent Allied interference, go once more to the aid of his Italian ally, this time in Greece.

Consequently Operation 'Marita' was planned, and Fliegerkorps VIII of Luftflotte 4, which was in eastern Europe, was moved to airfields in Bulgaria, ready to attack Greece and central and southern Yugoslavia; other units of Luftflotte 4 would attack from the north. The forces in Bulgaria included I and III/StG 2, the former from North Africa, the latter from France, both with Ju87Bs; II and III/JG 27 with Bf109Es, and I(J)/LG 2, also equipped with Bf109Es; this latter Gruppe was under the command of JG 77, II and III Gruppen of which were at Deta in Rumania; indeed it would soon be re-titled I/JG 77. The Gruppe was specially trained for ground attack and fighter-bomber operations. Other units included II/ZG 26 with Bf110Cs, 1(H)/4 and 1(H)/22 with Hs126s and Fiesler Fi156 Storch, and IV/KGzbV 1 with Junkers Ju52/3ms.

In Rumania and Hungary were I, II and III/KG 2, and III/KG 3 with Dornier Do17Z-2s, II/KG 26 from Sicily with He111Hs, and a number of Ju88A units, including I and II/LG 1; there were also the Bf109Fs, of II and III/JG 54 and the Bf109Es of I/JG 27, while 7/JG 26 and III/ZG 26 moved to South-Eastern Italy to take part in operations. III/JG 52 was held in reserve at Bucharest. The Italians were also preparing for Operation 'Marita'; obviously, the units of 4ª Squadra and Aeronautica dell'Albania would continue to operate over Greece

but they were also well-placed to attack targets in Southern Yugoslavia. At the same time the headquarters of 2ª Squadra was moved to Eastern Italy for operations over Western-central Yugoslavia—the Yugoslavs would face air attack from every side. The Italian units poised ready to support the Luftwaffe's mighty strength of 1,200 aircraft with Luftflotte 4, mustered themselves something over 650 aircraft within immediate range of Balkan targets. These units were as follows:—

2ª Squadra, East coast of Italy

18° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Aviano
25° Gruppo BT	Fiat BR20	Forli
99° Gruppo BT	Fiat BR20	Vicenza
7° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	Treviso
9° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	Gorizia
10° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	Ronchi
16° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	Ravenna

and six army co-operation squadriglie, four with Ro37s and two with Ca311s. Total: 61 bombers, 90 fighters, 41 army co-operation aircraft.

4ª Squadra, South-Eastern Italy

13° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Gioia del Colle
37° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Lecce
38° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	Foggia
35° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis & Z506B	Brindisi
47° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Grottaglie
50° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Brindisi
104° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM79	Foggia
105° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM79	Bari
97° Gruppo BaT	Junkers Ju87B	Lecce
153° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200 & Fiat CR42	Brindisi, Bari and Grottaglie
356ª Squadriglia CT	Macchi MC200	Bari
370ª Squadriglia CT	Macchi MC200	Grottaglie

Total: 149 bombers, 12 Z506Bs, 20 dive-bombers, 65 fighters.

Aeronautica dell'Albania

101° Gruppo BaT	Junkers Ju87B	Tirana
22° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	Tirana (two squadriglie only)
24° Gruppo CT	Fiat G50	Devoli
150° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	Valona
154° Gruppo CT	Fiat G50	Devoli
160° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR42	Tiranan

and eight army co-operation squadriglie, five with Ro37s and three with Ca311s. Total: 20 dive-bombers, 140 fighters, 68 army co-operation aircraft.

Covered by heavy air attack, divisions of the German, Hungarian and Bulgarian armies moved into Yugoslavia, while German troops moved into Greece, crossing the Bulgarian frontier with Eastern Macedonia. In an operation codenamed Operation 'Strafgericht' (Retribution), Luftwaffe bombers delivered a shattering attack on Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital. The Royal Yugoslav Air Force was swiftly shattered, both in the air and on the ground, and on the opening day the outstanding fighter performance of the campaign for the Luftwaffe was achieved by Lt Fritz Giesshardt of I(J)/LG 2, who shot down four Yugoslav Hawker Fury biplane fighters in one sortie. Pilots of JG 54 in the north encountered both Yugoslav Hurricanes and Messerschmitt Bf109Es, but were able to conquer both types speedily, also on one occasion taking a heavy toll of a formation of Yugoslav Blenheims. Only in the south was a setback encountered when Bf109s of III/JG 27 supporting forces moving down the Rupel Pass from Bulgaria into Greece, fell foul of the RAF Hurricanes of 33 Squadron, which claimed five of the German fighters for no loss; two German pilots were killed, one wounded, and a fourth taken prisoner.

In the meantime the RAF's Blenheims had been ordered to attack communications targets in Bulgaria, including the marshalling yards at Sofia, and they were joined in these attacks by Wellingtons at night. After the first day, the weather closed in considerably, and sorties were greatly reduced over Northern Greece, but whenever weather allowed, both sides were out in force. As the German columns poured into Macedonia, Blenheims hammered at convoys advancing in the area of Monastir, but for several days the covering German fighters were not able to catch them. Finally, on April 13th, II/JG 27 was able to avenge III Gruppe's losses of the 6th when 6 Staffel intercepted six Blenheims of 211 Squadron and shot down every one.

By this time there was no longer any opposition in the air over Yugoslavia, and operations were flown by both bombers and fighters in direct support of the armoured columns which were staging a classic Wehrmacht 'Blitzkrieg' on the shattered Yugoslav army. Over Greece however the RAF and the remnant of the Royal Hellenic Air Force continued to fight, taking a toll of the Ju87s, Ju88s, Bf110s and Bf109s which operated in support of the forces moving on Salonica. On April 15th a savage attack was launched on Allied airfields at Larissa, near the front, by units of both JG 27 and JG 77, 20 Bf109s shooting down two Hurricanes as they attempted to scramble, though two Bf109s

were lost, one shot down by a Hurricane and the other by ground fire; claims were also made against PZL P-24s and Gladiators, and a squadron of Blenheims was badly shot-up on the ground. Over Athens an attacking force of Ju88s encountered defending Hurricanes, which claimed to have shot down six of the bombers. Another heavy attack was made on Paramythia in the west, where the remnants of the Royal Yugoslav Air Force had just arrived, and here all 46 aircraft on the ground were put out of action.

Airfield attacks continued next day, a complete fighter squadron of the Royal Hellenic Air Force which had recently re-equipped with ex-RAF Gladiators, being wiped out on the ground. By this stage the campaign in Yugoslavia was virtually over, and Salonika was in German hands; the Greek Army had almost ceased to exist in Macedonia, but the British Expeditionary Force was still in central Greece, and on April 14th Hitler decided to continue with the occupation of the whole country. On the 16th the British positions before Mount Olympus were abandoned under pressure, and a disastrous retreat to the south began, RAF units withdrawing to the Athens area.

Luftwaffe aircraft streamed over Athens on the 20th, 90 Ju88s, Do17s, Bf110s and Bf109s attacking the capital. A small force of Hurricanes rose to oppose them, claiming 15 German aircraft shot down, but at least seven of the Hurricanes fell to the escorting fighters, II/ZG 26 claiming five and II/JG 27 four, three by Oblt Gustav Rödel; JG 27 lost two Bf109s during this battle. Amongst the British pilots killed was Sqn Ldr M. T. St J. Pattle, DFC & Bar, commanding officer of 33 Squadron, and perhaps the RAF's top-scoring fighter pilot of the whole war; it seems that his aircraft was shot down by Bf110s of II/ZG 26.

Next day the Bf109s returned to catch some of the RAF's remaining Blenheims on the ground at Menidi, where several of them were destroyed; the Messerschmitts were back on the 22nd, again attacking the Blenheims. These had been flying key RAF personnel to Crete, but now they were ordered back to Egypt with the remaining army co-operation Lysanders. The gallant Greek army on the Albanian front had continued to hold the Italians out of their country until the 21st, but they tried to withdraw too late, and were cut off by German armoured columns which had cut across the country from Mount Olympus, and were forced to surrender. Evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force to Crete was then ordered, and to cover this the

remaining Hurricanes were to concentrate on Araxos airfield in Morea, where the remaining aircraft of the the Royal Hellenic Air Force were also arriving. This airfield had already suffered one attack by Do17s, Ju88s and Bf109s, followed by a second by Bf110s, when the RAF fighters arrived there, and were at once fired on by trigger-happy Greek gunners.

On the morning of April 23rd II/ZG 26 sent its whole force of Bf110s to strafe Araxos, arriving just as five reinforcement Hurricanes from Crete had landed. A few Hurricanes got into the air, but most were caught on the ground where 13 were destroyed, together with most of the Greek aircraft. Those in the air claimed several victories, but one was shot down. Next day the seven surviving Hurricanes left for Crete, and the surviving Greek aircraft began the journey to Egypt. Embarkation of the Expeditionary Force began on the 25th, the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica now having virtually a free hand to operate against the Allied shipping transporting it to Crete.

With the end of the campaign in Greece and Yugoslavia, the greater part of the German army withdrew northwards to await Operation 'Barbarossa', a substantial part of the Luftwaffe strength involved, also going with it. The end in Greece also brought stock-taking for the Regia Aeronautica. During the six months fighting there, the Italians had claimed 218 air victories, with 55 more probables, 160 by the fighters in Albania and 56 by the bombers, most of these being claimed by the units of 4ª Squadra. The admitted losses were 65 aircraft, approximately the number claimed only by the Royal Hellenic Air Force, without allowing for the claims of the RAF at all! It remains odd why RAF claims against the Regia Aeronautica in Greece and in the desert should have resulted in so much greater a percentage of apparent overclaiming than when fighting against the Luftwaffe on this, or other fronts, or against the Japanese in the difficult terrain of Burma; it was not the case in East Africa or over Malta, where claims and losses were much more closely related.

Crete

Fliegerkorps VIII remained in Greece, having settled at airfields around Athens and in Morea, to take part in the next phase of Hitler's plans for the area, Operation 'Mercury', the airborne invasion of Crete. Available for this operation were the following units:—

I, II and III/KG 2	Dornier Do17Z-2	Tatoi
I and II/LG 1	Junkers Ju88A	Eleusis
II/KG 26	Heinkel He111H	Eleusis
I and III/StG 2	Junkers Ju87B	Mycene, Molai, Scarpanto (an island between Crete and Rhodes)
I and II/ZG 26	Messerschmitt Bf110C	Argos
I, II and III/JG 77	Messerschmitt Bf109E	Molai

This force totalled some 430 bombers and 180 fighters.

The Regia Aeronautica had reinforced its component in the Aegean to co-operate with the Luftwaffe in operations against Crete, the force available totalling 21 bombers, four torpedo-bombers, 20 fighters, four fighter-reconnaissance floatplanes and two reconnaissance floatplanes, as follows:—

92° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM79	Gadurra
50° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	Morizza
41° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM84	
281ª Squadriglia Sil	Savoia SM79sil	Gadurra
161ª Squadriglia	Meridionali Ro43	Leros
162ª Squadriglia CT	Fiat CR42	Scarpanto
163ª Squadriglia CT	Fiat CR32 & CR42	Gadurra

One section of Cant Z506Bs

While Italian bombers and torpedo-bombers attacked Allied shipping between Greece, Crete and Egypt, the bombers of Fliegerkorps VIII opened the air assault on Crete on May 3rd, 24 Ju88s attacking the airfields on the island. The unescorted bombers were intercepted by RAF Hurricanes which claimed three shot down, with others probably destroyed; next day shipping in the harbour at Suda Bay was the target for LG 1's aircraft, and this time the defenders claimed five. Raids continued, CR42s of 162ª and 163ª Squadriglie joining Bf110s and Bf109s in escorting the German bombers to the target, the Italian fighters particularly escorting the Ju87s, which were based closer to the Italians' Aegean bases.

Bf110s of ZG 26 strafed Allied airfields on Crete on the 10th, and again on the 13th. Next day they were accompanied by Bf109s of JG 77 in a big assault, and then, during the 15th and 16th they were joined again by Ju87s and Ju88s. The handful of RAF and Royal Navy fighter pilots put up a desperate fight, but steadily they were worn down; on May 18th and 19th came further big attacks, and the air bases at Maleme and Heraklion were then finally made completely untenable. On the latter date the remaining seven flyable fighters, four Hurricanes and three Gladiators, took off for the last time and headed for Egypt. They left only hours before the invasion began.

All was ready by the evening of May 19th in Greece. Some 500 Ju52/3m transports had originally been allocated for Operation 'Marita', but after the end of that campaign most were in urgent need of overhaul. The decision to launch an airborne operation against Crete was taken on April 15th, and by the 25th Operation 'Mercury' had been finalised. A complete corps of paratroops and air-landing infantry were ordered from Germany to Greece, though in the event not all were able to reach the area in time due to the limited transport facilities of the Balkans, a mountain division already in the area being substituted. Meanwhile the Ju52/3ms had all been flown away to the north for overhaul on May 1st, and were only beginning to trickle back into Greece gradually. By the 15th however, 493 aircraft in 10 Gruppen, forming Fliegerkorps XI, were back in the area, though only on rough, sandy airstrips, the main airfields being jammed to overflowing with the units of Fliegerkorps VIII KGzbV 60, 101 and 102 were based at Topolia, 40, 105 and I Gruppe of Air Landing Geschwader 1 were at Tanogra, and the other four Gruppen at

various small strips elsewhere. 100 DFS 230 gliders had also been brought in to carry the first wave of troops to the target area.

Initially, distribution of aviation fuel raised many problems, but finally all was ready, and the transport force had grown to 530 Ju52/3ms. At dawn on May 20th a series of airborne attacks were made on British strongpoints by Do17s of KG 2, He111s of II/KG 26, Ju87s of StG 2, and the fighters of JG 77 and ZG 26. Immediately these finished, the gliders, towed by Ju52/3ms, arrived overhead, cast-off, and landed on the north-west corner of Crete, around the village and airfield of Maleme. Reaction on the ground by General Freyberg's Anzac Corps was violent, and the invaders were soon involved in hard fighting.

Now the Ju52/3ms returned, 493 of them dropping paratroops to back up the initial assault. Heavily involved on the ground, the Allied troops did not put up a particularly fierce anti-aircraft barrage, and only seven transports were shot down. On return however, the first aircraft to land on the sandy strips created clouds of dust, following formations suffering a considerable number of crashes and collisions as they tried to land.

Throughout the day the fighting raged across the north of the island, very severe losses being inflicted on the German troops, and by dawn the next day the success of the operation was very much in doubt. The Ju52/3ms then returned in droves, landing on the newly-captured airfield at Maleme under heavy fire from the nearby New Zealanders. One in three of the transports were hit, and soon 80 wrecked Junkers littered the airfield. From Egypt British Blenheims and Marylands had begun operating over Crete from the very start of the landings, attacking some Ju52/3ms in the air, and bombing or strafing others on the ground. Despite relatively heavy losses in relation to the number of aircraft employed, they were to continue to operate over the island for the rest of the month, bombing in support of the army, and attacking transport and bomber aircraft in the area, joined in the latter task by long-range Hurricanes as these became available.

Although German reinforcements were now coming in at a high rate, heavy equipment, guns and vehicles, could not be brought by air, and to succeed in defeating the determined resistance of the hard-fighting Anzacs, this equipment was urgently needed. Flotillas of caiques—small fishing vessels—were loaded with the necessary stores and men, and set sail during the night of the 21st/22nd. However the

British Mediterranean Fleet had put to sea to prevent just this sort of reinforcement, and two groups each of seven cruisers and destroyers were already patrolling the area, one flotilla of caiques being attacked and several sunk, the remainder, together with other groups of these vessels, being forced to return to port.

With daylight on the 22nd, Ju87s, Bf109s and Bf110s were sent out to attack these British vessels, and two cruisers were slightly damaged in one group. More vessels were now arriving in the area, and a total of three groups, A, B and D, joined up to concentrate the anti-aircraft fire of two battleships, five cruisers and 12 destroyers in case of further air attack; this main fleet positioned itself to the west of the island. Meanwhile group C, comprising four cruisers and three destroyers, remained to the north, and had just spotted a new flotilla of caiques approaching when the Ju88s of I/LG 1 appeared overhead, dive-bombing the British vessels and badly damaging the cruiser *Naiad* with near misses. An Italian torpedo-boat at the same time laid a smokescreen to protect the retreating caiques, and more Luftwaffe bombers were thrown in, Do17s of KG 2 and Ju88s of I/LG 1 keeping up the attack for three and a half hours, and slightly damaging the cruiser *Carlisle*.

In the afternoon Bf109 fighter-bombers of III/JG 77 attacked the main fleet, hitting the battleship *Warspite* and inflicting serious damage. Somewhat later, the Ju87s of StG 2 returned to the attack, catching the destroyer *Greyhound* alone—she had been despatched on her own after some caiques. The Stukas dived to the attack, gaining direct hits with two bombs, and the vessel went down. Admiral Cunningham, the British commander, ordered two cruisers and two destroyers to go to the assistance of survivors, but as they did so, Ju87s and Ju88s again attacked, sinking the cruiser *Gloucester*. The other vessels were then ordered to rejoin the main fleet at once, but as they turned to leave the area a single Bf109 of I/JG 77 (I(J)/LG 2) with a 500lb bomb beneath its belly, dived on the cruiser *Fiji* and gained a near miss which exploded close enough alongside to cause devastating damage, and the vessel came to a halt. The pilot radioed this information to base, and in minutes more Bf109s appeared to attack again, getting a direct hit following which *Fiji* sank.

As dusk fell on the 22nd five British destroyers which had been despatched from Malta arrived off the Cretan coast at Maleme and began shelling German forces ashore. At dawn 24 Ju87s of I/StG 2

attacked these destroyers as they took evasive action at high speed, but with great skill the dive-bomber pilots hit *Kelly* and *Kashmir*, both of which sank.

It was a considerable defeat for the Mediterranean Fleet, and realising that he could not remain in the area without air support, Cunningham ordered the fleet back to Alexandria on the 23rd. Reinforcements and heavy equipment were then poured into Crete without hindrance, and by the 27th the position of the defenders had become hopeless, evacuations from the south coast beginning that night.

In an effort to reduce the preponderance of German air power, the Mediterranean Fleet's only aircraft carrier, *Formidable*, put to sea on the 25th, launching an air strike on the island of Scarpanto at dawn on the 26th; the Ju87s of I and III/StG 2 had recently moved to this base. The attack gained complete surprise, destroying several aircraft on the ground, but it was on too small a scale to achieve much lasting benefit. Early in May II/StG 2 had been sent back to Africa to join in the attack on shipping convoys supplying Tobruk, and when out on one such mission during the 26th, the Gruppe's 30 Ju87s came upon *Formidable* returning from her strike purely by chance, and at once attacked. A defending patrol of Fulmars intercepted, claiming four of the bombers shot down, but two hits were gained on the flight deck fore and aft, and a near miss caused more damage underwater. The damage inflicted was severe enough to cause the carrier to be despatched, via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, to join *Illustrious* in the United States for major repairs. The Mediterranean Fleet was left with no carrier on strength for many months to come.

Despite this setback, the fleet had to go out again to assist in the evacuation of the Anzac Corps, giving the Ju87s and Ju88s new opportunities to attack as the vessels, laden with troops, made for the relative safety of Alexandria. On the 27th the battleship *Barham* was slightly damaged, and two days later destroyers *Imperial* and *Hereward* were sunk, the cruiser *Orion* badly damaged, and another cruiser and destroyer slightly hit. The cruiser *Perth* suffered heavy damage on the 30th, destroyers being slightly damaged on this date and on the 31st, while on June 1st, the last day of the evacuation, the anti-aircraft cruiser *Calcutta* was sunk by two Ju88s of LG 1. It was a triumph for the Luftwaffe.

The last day of activity over Crete for the RAF was the 31st, when two Ju88s, a Bf110 and a Cant Z1007bis were claimed shot down for

the loss of one Hurricane. The evacuation had brought out about half of the troops on the island, and the operation had cost the Luftwaffe, from May 14th–31st, to all causes, 220 aircraft, 119 of them transports, with 148 more damaged; British losses had been 38. Although victorious, the German airborne corps had suffered such grievous losses that any further airborne operations on any scale above that of a raid were quite out of the question, planned landings on Malta and Cyprus having to be abandoned. Indeed, the corps would not in the event undertake another major landing throughout the rest of the war, the troops being put into the line when needed, as special infantry.

While operations in Crete had been progressing, the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had been involved elsewhere at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, albeit on a much smaller scale. In Iraq a military coup had brought to power the pro-Axis government of Raschid Ali. With the encouragement of the German and Italian Foreign Ministries, which gave promises of support, he began hostilities against British bases in the country at the start of May, notably surrounding the important RAF training base at Habbaniyah. The British, with only a small garrison and a makeshift air force, reacted vigorously, and the siege was quickly lifted, the Iraqi Air Force being heavily attacked on its own airfields.

Requests for assistance led the Germans to set up the Fliegerführer Iraq Oberst Werner Junck, and to despatch a small force of Bf110s from II/ZG 26 and He111s from II/KG 26, both sent from Greece. Supplies and equipment were flown in via Rhodes and airfields in the Vichy French territory of Syria, by a somewhat larger force of Ju52/3ms and four-engined Junkers Ju90s. All the Luftwaffe aircraft involved were painted with Iraqi markings before taking part.

Arriving in the middle of May when help for the garrison at Habbaniyah was already under way, and the Iraqi army had fled from its positions around the base, the Germans found that the Iraqi Air Force had already been almost totally destroyed. It was not a very happy adventure for the Germans; using Mosul as their base, which was devoid of camouflage, proper dispersals or adequate anti-aircraft defences, they suffered heavily from attacks by British aircraft when on the ground. Three He111s made one damaging attack on Habbaniyah, and shot down a Gladiator after it had brought down one of their formation. Bf110s strafed the columns moving to the assistance of the Habbaniyah garrison, and then strafed British troops as they advanced

after the fleeing Iraqis, towards Baghdad. They met increasing numbers of Hurricanes and Gladiators in the air, and while they managed to claim one of the latter shot down, at least two of their own fighters were shot down and others damaged.

The RAF then began attacking the French airfields in Syria, where several Luftwaffe transports were destroyed, and by the end of the month, when the Iraqi government fled and an armistice was signed, the Germans had lost all the 14 Bf110s and five He111s originally sent, together with a number of transports. During the last three days of the fighting a squadriglia of CR42s of the Regia Aeronautica, 155ª, also painted with Iraqi markings, finally arrived, after much French prevarication about their use of the Syrian airfields in transit, which had greatly delayed their arrival. Flying from Kirkuk, they undertook a few missions in front of Baghdad, shooting down a Hawker Hardy army co-operation aircraft, and losing one fighter to a Gladiator. Two more CR42s had to be burnt due to combat damage, the rest then escaping as hostilities ended, and reaching Rhodes a few days later. Here the squadriglia was re-numbered 164ª, joining with the resident 162ª and 163ª Squadriglie in the Aegean to form 161° Gruppo Autonomo CT.

With the end of operations on Crete and in Iraq, the greater part of Fliegerkorps VIII departed for the north and Operation 'Barbarossa', at this time only three weeks away. I and II/ZG 26, JG 77, I and III/StG 2, and KG 2 were among the units leaving, together with most of the transport Gruppen of Fliegerkorps XI. Only II/KG 26 and I and II/LG 1 remained behind.

Abortive British Offensives

Following the arrival at Alexandria of the British 'Tiger' convoy on May 12th, a small offensive was launched three days later under the codename Operation 'Brevity'. Supported by only a limited air contingent, it was doomed to immediate failure when Rommel counter-attacked. Action in the skies during this fighting was very limited, the Luftwaffe fighters being at extreme range, and the RAF heavily committed elsewhere.

By early June however, the British were showing every sign of recovery, as units evacuated from Greece and Crete were re-equipped and returned to the line. The imminence of Operation 'Barbarossa' forbade the despatch of any reinforcements for the Luftwaffe, though

on the first day of the month 7/JG 26 arrived from Sicily, joining I/JG 27 at Gazala. By the middle of the month, before Rommel had been able to bring forward sufficient supplies to allow a further assault on Tobruk to be launched, the British were again in a position to launch a major offensive, and this began on June 14th, code-named 'Battleaxe'. The RAF was already much stronger than in the previous month, and the first appearances in strength by Tomahawks, Beaufighters and Marylands occurred at this time.

Available to the Luftwaffe were:—

I/JG 27	Messerschmitt Bf109E
7/JG 26	Messerschmitt Bf109E
III/ZG 26	Messerschmitt Bf110C
I/StG 1	Junkers Ju87B
II/StG 2	Junkers Ju87B
2(H)/14	Henschel Hs126, Messerschmitt Bf109E and Bf110C
II/KG 26	Heinkel He111
I/LG 1	Junkers Ju88A
1(F)/123	Junkers Ju 88D

The Regia Aeronautica still disposed 2°, 18°, 151° and 155° Gruppi, and 374ª Squadriglia CT with fighters in North Africa (about 70 aircraft), together with two gruppi and one squadriglia of bombers (about 25 aircraft) and three reconnaissance units, but with the exception of the fighters, most of these were based well back from the front line on coastal and other rear area duties.

When the fighting began on the ground, activity in the air increased markedly, the Bf109s gaining an early ascendency over the predominantly Hurricane-equipped Allied squadrons, and taking a heavy toll of them. Again the advance made little headway, and by the 18th it was all over and the British were back behind their start line, licking their wounds. On this latter date the Messerschmitts had engaged in their first big fight with the new Tomahawks, shooting down three without loss.

With the finish of this new offensive so swiftly, a period of stalemate set in, and each side began building-up anew for some decisive future move. For the British the supply and maintenance of the garrison in Tobruk was of prime importance, and it was here that most aerial action occurred during the following weeks as supply convoys sailed

along the coast towards the port. Ju87s, Bf109s and Bf110s were very active at this period, as were the G50s of the Regia Aeronautica, which tended to concentrate their activities on strafing attacks over the front, and to joining in escorts to the German Stukas. The Ju87s were particularly successful at this time, sinking substantial numbers of the vessels sailing to and from Tobruk.

During July the first Macchi MC200s to arrive in Libya were sent over, both 153° and 157° Gruppi arriving, joined by 209ª Squadriglia with Ju87Bs. 18° Gruppo withdrew to Italy to re-equip with more modern fighters, but it was soon replaced by 160° Gruppo, also CR42-equipped. Throughout July 7/JG 26 was very active, particularly around Tobruk, and when it left to return to France at the end of the month, it had claimed at least eight victories, five of these having been credited to Müncheberg, who had raised his score to 48, having by now received the Oakleaves to his Knights' Cross.

As the long summer of 1941 dragged on, patrol activity and skirmishing on the ground was matched by desultory combats in the air as the two sides increased their respective strengths with painful slowness, each subject to its own constraints. By August raids on Axis airfields close to the front by heavily-escorted bomber formations were becoming more common, and these occasionally erupted into big dogfights, as on the 21st when Bf109s were able to shoot down two Marylands and several fighters for minimal loss. The month also saw the arrival of the first specialised night-fighters, Bf110s of I/NJG 3 which flew to Derna from Europe, via Greece.

September marked a resurgence of Italian fighter activity, several big strafing attacks being made on British fighter airfields around Sidi Barrani. On the 3rd 27 G50s of 20° Gruppo swept in, claiming much damage and loss to British fighters both on the ground and in the air. In fact results were not nearly as impressive as was believed, the attackers being badly mauled by defending Tomahawks which shot down or badly damaged nine of the Italian fighters. Other raids followed however, and on the 7th 22 MC200s of 153° Gruppo, joined by 15 G50s of 155° Gruppo, achieved much better results, at least 21 British fighters being burned out or badly damaged on the ground. The result of this attack was to force the evacuation of the airfields as other than advanced refuelling bases, and to cause all RAF fighter units at the front to have to operate from the Sidi Heneish area which was much further from the front line.

Despite their continuing successes against the opposing fighters, the German fighter pilots were worried by the performance of the Tomahawks, and were now clamouring for better aircraft than the Bf109E. During September the Staffeln of I/JG 27 began withdrawing one at a time to fly to Germany to re-equip with the splendid Messerschmitt Bf109F, the performance of which was a very great improvement over the faithful 'Emil'. At the same time the first reinforcements to arrive since the Spring began flying in in the shape of II/JG 27; this unit had been operating in Russia since its activities in Greece in April, and had then returned to Germany where it had just finished conversion to Bf109Fs also. 4 Staffel was the first to fly in, making its first sorties on the 26th. Meanwhile however, the Italians had suffered a considerable loss on the 14th when the 12 Ju87Bs of 209ª Squadriglia on a mission over the Egyptian frontier, lost their escort and themselves, and ran short of fuel, ten force-landing, eight of them falling into British hands.

In October the pace of operations stepped-up following the reinforcements that had arrived each side of the line, and on the 3rd the new Bf109Fs of II/JG 27 fought their first combat, shooting down three British fighters for one loss. An increased need for night-fighters at home led to the recall of I/NJG 3 at the end of October, but early in November six Junkers Ju88C-6 night-fighters of 2/NJG 2 were despatched to Benghazi from Sicily for the defence of this major supply port. At the same time 1/JG 27 returned from Germany with I Gruppe's first Bf109Fs, and III/ZG 26, which had been split up with Staffeln on Sicily and Crete, as well as in Africa, re-assembled all three Staffeln at Derna.

Rommel was now almost ready to launch a new attack on Tobruk to rid himself once and for all of this thorn in his flesh which prevented him from considering an attack across the frontier into Egypt. By early November the Luftwaffe had four Staffeln of Bf109Fs in Libya (three of II/JG 27 and one of I/JG 27, the other two Staffeln of this latter unit still being in Germany re-equipping); the Stukagruppen were just being reinforced by II/StG 3, but otherwise the bomber and reconnaissance elements were much as in the previous June.

The Regia Aeronautica however was bringing in considerable reinforcements of potent new Macchi MC202 fighters with Daimler Benz DB601 engines, manufactured under licence from Germany. During mid-November 1° Stormo CT arrived, comprising 6° and 17°

Gruppi equipped with these aircraft, 9° Gruppo leaving shortly afterwards to replace its CR42s with the new fighters. These units, together with 8° and 150° Gruppi with MC200s, 3° Gruppo with CR42s, 236ª Squadriglia with CR42 fighter-bombers, and 209ª Squadriglia with its Ju87Bs, made up the strength of 5ª Squadra's eastern sector, joined by the Z506B floatplanes of 174ª Squadriglia. In the west air defence of Tripolitania was maintained by 160° Gruppo (CR42s) and 12° Gruppo (G50s), while the BR20s of 13° Stormo BT remained here, joining the He111s of II/KG 26 on night raids over Egypt and the front. Other units in the west included two squadriglie of SM79 torpedo-bombers, two of floatplanes and one of transport aircraft. 8° Stormo BT returned to Italy during this period.

'Operation Crusader'

This then was the disposition and strength of the Axis air forces in Africa on November 18th, 1941 when the new British offensive, code-named 'Crusader', began, catching Rommel completely by surprise just as he was about to launch his own offensive. Heavy rains had bogged down much of the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica on the forward airfields, and frequent strafing and bombing attacks by Beaufighters and other British aircraft quickly cut the number of aircraft available. Soon however, the fighters and dive-bombers were in the air, and as the heaviest fighting yet seen in the desert broke out below, many violent clashes occurred in the air.

On the ground fierce fighting between the opposing armoured formations began in earnest on the 19th, and by some astute manoeuvring, Rommel was able to concentrate his forces to meet smaller British columns and pick them off one at a time. On November 22nd came a great clash between the fighters, as the Germans sought once more to achieve superiority over the battlefield. They found the Tomahawks a tougher proposition than the Hurricanes had been, and despite the flashing performance of the new Bf109F, which permitted them to shoot down ten of the British fighters and four Blenheim bombers in two big battles, their own loss of six Bf109s was more than the small force of fighters could stand on any sort of regular basis, and no further direct clashes with British fighters were to take place. In future the German fighters would use their superior performance to sit above the British formations, diving down to pick off stragglers at will. Although these tactics would enable them to shoot down large numbers of opposing fighter aircraft for very light losses, and would

frequently permit them to break up British attacks on their own bomber formations, they did not allow them to prevent the enemy bomber formations getting through to hammer the ground forces where and when they wished. Although the Luftwaffe was still to achieve many individual successes, it had from this time conceded air superiority to the British Western Desert Air Force, which now also enjoyed numerical superiority, and was thus enabled to play an ever-increasingly important part in the situation on the ground.

The advance on the ground had run into severe trouble however, and on the 23rd the British armoured formations were forced to withdraw to reform. Seizing the initiative, Rommel pushed two strong columns towards the Egyptian frontier next day, the Tobruk garrison now being forced to sortie out to prevent disaster, while New Zealand infantry dug in around Sidi Rezegh to resist the German advance. Both air forces redoubled their efforts to assist their respective armies, the Bf110s of III/ZG 26 being thrown in to make strafing attacks in support of the panzers. The twin-engined 'destroyers' ran into instant trouble, a dozen of them being 'bounced' by Tomahawks on the 24th, losing four, and only being able to shoot down two of their attackers in return; next day they were again badly hit, several more being shot down.

British fighters were also ordered to make further ground-strafing attacks, the Bf109s continuing to inflict heavy losses on them as the Germans attacked Sidi Aziez and Bir el Hariya, re-taking the port of Bardia. By dint of hard fighting, the New Zealanders and the Tobruk garrison were able to join hands on the 28th, breaking the long siege of the fortress-port, but two days later a strong German counter-attack broke through the narrow corridor that had been opened up, and the defenders were isolated once more.

On December 3rd Rommel once more sent two strong columns towards the Egyptian frontier, heavily supported by Ju87s, and during the next few days the Hurricanes and Tomahawks clashed with these in a number of heavy battles, resulting in severe losses on both sides. Italian fighters and fighter-bombers also took an active part in these battles, suffering some substantial losses.

The Afrika Korps was now running very short of fuel due to the shipping losses being inflicted by aircraft and submarines from Malta, and in consequence the operations of the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had to be reduced. When a British counter-attack stopped the

latest German push in its tracks, Rommel was forced to order a withdrawal from Sidi Rezegh to a new line which had been prepared in the Gazala area. On December 8th the siege of Tobruk was completely lifted, and the British forces surged forward in pursuit.

Despite fuel shortage, air reinforcements were on the way to make good recent losses, and neutralise the great increase in British strength in the air. On the 6th III/JG 53 flew in from Sicily, where it had just arrived to operate over Malta; this unit had flown in Russia before moving to the Mediterranean area, re-equipping with Bf109Fs in October just before its move to southern climes. A few days later JG 27's III Gruppe also arrived, coming direct from the Eastern Front, also flying Bf109Fs, and thus bringing the whole Geschwader together for the first time since 1940; III/JG 27 had several extremely experienced and successful pilots amongst its ranks. Other units to arrive in the area were I/StG 3 and III/LG 1 with Ju87s and Ju88s respectively, while the long-range reconnaissance unit, 2(F)/123, was replaced by 1(F)/121.

By December 13th the British were in a position to attack the new Axis positions at Gazala, and for three days they pounded these in a direct assault, which failed to make headway. Finally, on the 16th an outflanking move to the south was attempted, and although this became bogged down in soft sand, the Axis withdrew swiftly before it could get fully under way and cut their lines of communications.

Fighters continued to gain a staggering number of victories for the numbers involved, whenever they were able to get into the air, and on the 10th I/JG 27 achieved a great success when it caught an unescorted formation of six Douglas Boston bombers, a new type which were just beginning to appear over the front, shooting down five of them and badly damaging the sixth. In an effort to provide more aviation fuel, fleets of Ju52/3ms now began flying in supplies from Crete. Becoming aware of this traffic British long-range fighters and Maryland bombers were waiting to intercept the transports on the 11th, and several were lost. Next day III/ZG 26 and I/NJG 2 provided escorts of Bf110s and Ju88Cs, shooting down seven Marylands and Blenheims, though a few more Ju52/3ms were lost.

Despite the recent reinforcements and the fuel from Crete, the Axis air forces were now in a parlous state. The ground forces were in headlong retreat towards the Agedabia area, and fuel shortage prevented flights by any but immediately combat-ready aircraft. As a result of

these conditions large numbers of aircraft had to be abandoned. Most of them were not in a badly damaged state, but there was insufficient time to repair them, and for those that were flyable, there was no fuel to allow their evacuation. Indeed, by the end of December nearly 500 German and Italian aircraft of all types had been left behind in the retreat, in many cases there not even having been time to render them fully unserviceable.

The Regia Aeronautica was also suffering heavy losses on the ground at airfields in the rear which were being attacked by the sabotage-commandos of the recently-formed Special Air Service. Indeed, so critical had become the position generally that by late December JG 27 could raise only six serviceable Bf109s from its three Gruppen. The Geschwader was to suffer a grievous loss on December 24th when Oblt Erbo Graf von Kageneck of III/JG 27, at this time one of the Luftwaffe's top-scoring fighter pilots with 67 victories to his credit, most of them in Russia, was mortally wounded in combat with some Hurricanes, dying of his wound on January 12th, 1942.

By the end of December the Afrika Korps was back in the Agedabia area, and activity in the air was greatly reduced by lack of fuel. At this time the Italians undertook some regrouping of their units, 153° and 157° Gruppi, and 374ª Squadriglia all returning to Italy, being replaced by 8°, 13° and 150° Gruppi, all similarly equipped with MC200s; at the same time 10° Gruppo began to exchange its CR42s for MC202s. 98° Gruppo, equipped with BR20 bombers, also left for Italy during the month. 153° Gruppo at the time of its withdrawal had been one of the more successful Regia Aeronautica units in the Desert, having claimed 19 confirmed and 12 probable aerial victories, and 35 aircraft destroyed on the ground. Since February 7th, 1941 Italian losses in the air, as opposed to aircraft destroyed or abandoned on the ground, stood at 66 totally destroyed and 126 damaged.

Towards the end of December 1941 the Axis fighters encountered the first new Curtiss Kittyhawk fighters over the front, these soon appearing in increasing numbers, but while these were fast at lower altitudes, and packed a heavier punch than any RAF fighters yet met (except the Beaufighter) they soon proved to be no match for a well-flown Bf109F, provided dogfights were avoided, or for that matter, for a competently-handled MC202.

Realising that the British were about to launch a new attack on his forces at Agedabia, Rommel forestalled them on January 6th, 1942,

pulling his troops back to strong positions at El Agheila. Supplies were now reaching Tripoli in satisfactory quantities due to the recent neutralisation of Malta, of which more later, while the British were now at the point of exhaustion. With their lines of communication extended to the limit, and with reinforcements and supplies suddenly cut due to the entry of Japan into the war in the Far East, they had reached the limit of their advance, and now were in much the same positions as they had been in February 1941—and in a similar dangerously weakened state. Operation 'Crusader' had achieved its immediate objectives, and was over; many of its gains were to prove to be but fleeting ones.

Malta, 1941—Offence and Defence

It is necessary at this point to return to the critically important island of Malta, which throughout the whole of the desert campaigns was to have so crucial an effect upon the fortunes of the opposing armies and air forces in Africa.

Early in June 1941 the last Luftwaffe units had left Sicily for the Eastern Front and for Africa, the pacification of the island, so nearly completed, being once more left to the Regia Aeronautica. This force re-opened its attack quite vigorously at first, escorted SM79s attacking on at least four occasions during the latter part of the month, while fighter sweeps by MC200s, and occasionally also by CR42s, quickly became commonplace. However, more and more Hurricanes were being ferried out to fly off aircraft carriers to the island, and a regular toll of the raiders was taken, particularly of the Italian fighters. At the same time Blenheim bombers began appearing on the island, and attacking Africa-bound shipping. BR20s of 31° Gruppo were now moved to Sicily, 18 of these aircraft arriving at Catania to begin a night assault on Malta. Early in July the Gruppo was merged with the similarly-equipped 43° Stormo at Gerbini, and with a total strength of 32 bombers, the stormo made its first sorties over the island during the night of the 5th–6th.

As the number of Blenheims and Beaufighters on the island continued to rise, further fighter sweeps were made during early July, but the defending Hurricanes continued to enjoy the edge, and Macchi losses continued at around two to four aircraft on each opposed sweep. On the 9th an RAF strafing attack on the seaplane base at Syracuse inflicted substantial damage, while later in the month Beaufighters

were to attack SM79s on the ground at both Marsala in Sicily and Elmas in Sardinia, where these aircraft were poised to attack any British convoys attempting to reinforce and provision the island. On July 26th a daring dawn raid on Grand Harbour, Valetta, was made by E-boats of the Italian Navy, supported by MC200s, but again Hurricanes were responsible for breaking this up, four E-boats being destroyed by cannon-firing aircraft, while three fighters were shot down for one Hurricane.

Each month throughout the summer of 1941 the tonnage of Axis shipping sunk by Malta-based units rose, while the Regia Aeronautica fighters struggled to regain superiority over the island so that their bombers could return to the attack. Sweeps by up to 16 Macchis at a time continued throughout August and September, but again and again the defences were able to meet them and drive them off after inflicting some losses.

During late September RAF aircraft again attacked Italian airfields in Sardinia and in the Libyan province of Tripolitania, as an escorted convoy approached the island. Attacks were made on the shipping, but defending fighters from *Ark Royal* were able to shoot down a shadowing floatplane and several BR20s of 98° Gruppo, operating from Castel Benito in Tripolitania.

The Regia Aeronautica was at last able to spring an unpleasant surprise on the British Hurricanes at the start of October when it introduced the first Macchi MC202s to action over the island with 4° Stormo. On their very first appearance in action on October 1st, 12 of these fighters engaged a formation of Hurricanes successfully, shooting down one without loss, another being claimed three days later. Before the month was out more sweeps and bomber escort missions had been flown by the new fighters, and further Hurricanes had been shot down, no losses being suffered by the Stormo during the whole of this period. At night however the Hurricanes of the Malta Night Fighter Unit were taking an increasing toll of the bombers, and on October 14th three BR20s were lost. Though some of these bombers were escorted over the island in daylight by MC202s later in the month, their days in Sicily were numbered, and before the end of the month 43° Stormo had been withdrawn to Galatina-Lucce on the mainland to undertake second-line duties. 171° Gruppo CN had been formed with CR42s for night operations over Sicily and Malta, but with the withdrawal of the bombers it was soon disbanded.

By now the Macchis, and increased flak defences on merchant shipping, were jointly inflicting substantial losses on the Malta-based Blenheims, which had to make their attacks at very low altitude. The Blenheims were now also appearing with increasing frequency over the Sicilian airfields, but rising losses here indicated a need for escorts. A big formation of 18 MC200s and 202s escorting four Z506Bs had been engaged by Hurricanes on November 8th, two Hurricanes being shot down, though three MC200s were lost. More Hurricanes arrived on Malta on the 12th to reinforce the fighter defences which had now begun offensive operations over Sicily, Hurricanes escorting Blenheims and also making fighter-bomber attacks on airfields themselves. During one such attack on the day of arrival of the reinforcements, the Macchis were again able to shoot down two Hurricanes, and one more fell on the 21st. It was not until November 29th that the British fighters were at last able to inflict losses on 4° Stormo, but by this time one of the unit's pilots, Serg Teresio Martinoli, had already been credited with four victories since the beginning of October.

By this time however, Operation 'Crusader' was well under way in Libya, and the crippling effects of Malta's striking power on the supply lines from Southern Europe were being seriously felt. On November 28th in consequence, Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring was ordered from the Central Russian front to Sicily as Commander-in-Chief South, and with him was to go Fliegerkorps II for operations over Malta. This Fliegerkorps was in the process of being virtually reformed after heavy losses suffered in Russia, and it comprised five Gruppen of Ju88A-4 bombers, four Gruppen of Bf109F fightres, and four Gruppen of Ju87B dive-bombers. It was to be joined in Sicily by I/NJG 2 and III/ZG 26, the former unit from Western Europe, the latter from Africa and Crete. The units from Russia were:—

I/KG 54, II and III/KG 77 and Kampfgruppen 606 and 806, all with Ju88A-4s.
Stab, I, II and III/JG 53, and II/JG 3, all with Bf109Fs.
Stab, I, II and III/StG 3, and Ergungsgruppe StG 1 with Ju87Bs.

It was to be mid December before these units arrived, and were in a position to begin operating over Malta, but when they did, they quickly made their presence felt again, small formations of Ju88s escorted by Bf109s attacking the airfields, the escorting fighters shooting down six Hurricanes in four days when the attack began.

Early in January 1942 Blenheims from Malta raided Sicilian airfields again, inflicting some losses to BR20s and Ju52/3ms on the ground, but throughout the month Luftwaffe sorties rose, and the toll of the defending fighters taken by the Bf109s climbed raipdly. On arrival in Sicily, two units of Fliegerkorps 2—I/StG 3 and III/JG 53—had immediately been rushed to Africa to assist the Afrika Korps, but the remaining aircraft kept up a regular series of attacks, the superiority of their equipment keeping losses very low.

Meanwhile the Regia Aeronautica was reforming 43° Stormo with 98° Gruppo, freshly back from North Africa, and 99° Gruppo, despatching part of the latter to Gorizia to join in operations against Croatian partisan forces in Yugoslavia. Within days the whole Stormo became involved in these activities, on which it remained for the rest of the year, 37° Stormo moving to Sicily to take over the night raids on Malta. Due, however, to the German units now occupying most of the airfields, only 40° and 55° Gruppi could move to the island, the rest of the Stormo remaining at Lecce on anti-submarine duties.

Throughout February the Luftwaffe continued to operate at will over Malta, giving the Hurricanes a bad time whenever they appeared. A supply convoy for the island sailed from Alexandria on February 13th, but after being heavily attacked by German and Italian aircraft from bases in the Aegean, it turned back after two days. Italian SM79 torpedo-bombers in this area were now becoming most adept at low-level shipping attack.

After a brief lull the air assault on Malta was resumed early in March, but on the 7th of this month the first Spitfires were delivered to the defenders, flying off the aircraft carrier *Eagle*. This was the first time Spitfires had been met outside Western Europe, and the German pilots were at first wary, but the new defenders were few in number, and while they were able to gain a few victories, their presence made no appreciable difference to German superiority at this stage. Ju88s continued to attack the airfields and harbours regularly in formations of three, six or eight, escorted by Bf109s from 12 to 20 in number.

During the month two more convoys approached, this time from the west. The first, coming in during March 10th and 11th was attacked by He111s and Ju88s of the Luftwaffe, while when the second arrived between the 21st and 24th, the Luftwaffe was joined by SM84s of 130° Gruppo Aerosiluranti from Sardinia and Sicily, and by SM79s and Z1007bis from Libya; in both cases heavy losses were inflicted on

the Allied shipping. Meanwhile over Malta itself, the BR20s of 55° Gruppo resumed night raids, though the unit was soon to be re-equipped with Z1007bis aircraft. On March 21st Bf110s of III/ZG 26 made a rare appearance over the island, but lost four of their number to defending Hurricanes; after this they left Malta operations strictly to the Bf109s. Another type to arrive in Sicily at this time were some of the first Ju87D Stukas, which went into service with III/StG 3, taking part in a new assault which began on April 1st.

The new attack was met by fresh Spitfires, albeit still in small numbers, but substantial losses were inflicted on the new model dive-bombers, and after the 10th the raids eased off. On this latter date also, III/JG 53, now back in Sicily after its brief stay in the desert, lost Lt Hermann Neuhoff, a veteran fighter pilot with 40 victories, 21 of them on the Russian front, when he was shot down by a Spitfire and became a prisoner.

On the 14th MC202s of 4° Stormo returned to Sicily to operate for a fortnight before flying on to Africa. Two days later Beaufort torpedo-bombers from Africa attacked a convoy bound for Tripoli, then making for Malta to refuel; Sicily-based Bf109s were providing the escort to the ships, and heavily attacked the Beauforts, shooting down two over the convoy, three more near the island, and a sixth as it went in to land. More Spitfires were on the way however, and on the 20th these flew off the American carrier *Wasp* in some strength. A well-timed strike from Sicily by Ju88s caught most of them on the ground refuelling, and a considerable number were destroyed. Raid after raid was made during a period of 48 hours, by the end of which the defenders were again reduced to a handful of aircraft. A few days later a force of Wellingtons was flown in from Egypt in an attempt to further disrupt convoys between Sicily and Libya, and to attack Axis airfields, but once more decisive and speedy action by the Luftwaffe swiftly destroyed the majority on the ground before any real damage could be done.

The heavy fighting throughout April cost the British 41 fighters destroyed and 87 damaged for only moderate Luftwaffe losses, giving the defenders much cause for concern. Late in the month a detachment of radar-equipped Beaufighters arrived from Egypt to deal with the resumption of night raids by the Italians however, and these quickly made their presence felt.

Early May again brought heavy fighting, and on the 9th Spitfires once more arrived in strength, recent losses more than being made

good when 64 of these fighters flew off *Wasp* and *Eagle*, 62 arriving safely. This time the British were better prepared, and when the Ju88s attempted to attack them on the ground, they were met by strong patrols which inflicted substantial losses. A convoy accompanied the carriers, and though it suffered heavy losses to air attack, one important vessel, *Welshman*, managed to limp into Valetta, carrying sufficient fuel to keep the defences going. Heavy fighting raged over the island throughout this period, but on the 18th yet more Spitfires arrived, the whole position for the defenders being much improved. It was at this stage that they were to be given a welcome rest, for demands of other fronts required the presence of much of Fliegerkorps II, and during the latter part of May II/JG 3 and I/JG 53 left for Russia to take part in the summer offensive, while III/JG 53, II/StG 3, III/ZG 26 and I/NJG 2 left for Africa, where Rommel was about to go on to the offensive at Gazala, and I/KG 54 moved to Greece.

The pacification of Malta once more passed to the Regia Aeronautica, as it had done a year earlier, and this force now moved 2° Gruppo CT to Sicily to begin operations with the new Reggiane Re2001 fighters. These were not, however, the only Reggiane fighters operating on the island; early in 1941 a test batch of five Re2000s had served briefly with 23° Gruppo, while later 15 production aircraft were formed into 377ª Squadriglia, and after patrolling off the south coast of Italy for some weeks, moved to Sicily for the air defence of the port of Palermo on the north-west coast. Although they were to remain here until re-equipment with MC200s took place in September, they were never used over Malta, and saw no action.

At this stage (late May) the Italian air units in Sicily were:—

4° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM84
88° Gruppo BT	Fiat BR20
33° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis
102° Gruppo BaT	Junkers Ju87B
2° Gruppo CT	Reggiane Re2001
155° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC202

4° Stormo with MC202s was already leaving for Africa, and the new 130° Gruppo Aerosiluranti with Savoia SM79 torpedo-bombers, which was just on its way to Sardinia, was also temporarily on the island.

The Battle of Gazala

The start of the new offensive by the Luftwaffe against Malta at the end of 1941 had saved the Axis forces in Libya. Before the tired and depleted British forces facing the Afrika Korps at El Agheila could be brought up to strength for a new attack, a large convoy of equipment and supplies had reached Tripoli on January 5th, 1942, the second to get through safely. Newly-arrived supplies of aviation fuel allowed the Luftwaffe fighters to get into the air again, and on the 7th they were able to shoot down seven Tomahawks without loss, another six British fighters falling to them two days later, including two of the new Kittyhawks.

By mid month about 25 of the 83 available Bf109s were serviceable, and as these were usually entrusted to the most experienced pilots, they continued to take a heavy toll of the numerically-superior enemy. On the 14th for example, two Bf109s of II/JG 27 were able to 'bounce' a large formation of Hurricanes and shoot down seven, six falling to Uffz Horst Reuter.

While the Jagdgruppen continued to do so well, other units were suffering more heavily however. Following the long retreat, the remains of the two depleted Stukagruppen of StG 1 and 2 were withdrawn to re-equip, and then to go to the Eastern Front, I/StG 3 taking their place, joined by the Italian Ju87s of 209ª Squadriglia. Frequently escorted by Italian fighters, these aircraft and their escorts fought a number of furious battles with Kittyhawks during early and mid January while trying to attack forward British positions, the Stukas and MC200s suffering some severe losses at this time.

The new German commander in the Mediterranean, Feldmarschall

Kesselring, decided that the subjugation of Malta was the primary objective before further offensive action in Africa was attempted, and III/JG 53 returned to Sicily to engage in the air assault planned for late January, joined by two Staffeln of the newly-arrived I/StG 3, and by the Ju88s of II/LG 1 and He111s of II/KG 26. Rommel was not satisfied to sit behind the Agheila defences however, and on the 26th he probed the British positions facing him, finding as in March 1941 that they were only lightly manned and were swiftly put to flight.

Without orders, and with only a few days supplies, he mustered his available forces and pushed forward; on the 27th he sent a small column across the Desert towards Mechili to give the impression that this was his main thrust, while swinging the bulk of his forces northwards to Benghazi. His gamble paid off, the British being taken completely by surprise and falling back in confusion; next day the important port was back in Axis hands, and by February 3rd his smaller column had taken Mechili also, the British 8th Army, as it had recently become, falling back to the prepared defences of the Gazala Line.

Heavy combat again flared as the RAF's Western Desert Air Force tried to slow down the pursuing Axis forces, and on February 8th especially there was severe fighting. By this time some Luftwaffe fighter pilots had been in Africa nearly a year, and the regular actions in the air had allowed several of them to amass impressive scores. At this stage Oblt Gerhard Homuth of I/JG 27 was leading with 39 victories since the previous April, but now on the 8th Lt Hans-Joachim Marseille of the same unit claimed four, passing Homuth to bring his own total to 40. They were closely followed by Ofw Otto Schulz of II/JG 27 who had claimed 37 victories in Africa in a considerably shorter space of time.

By the 10th the Afrika Korps, too weak at this stage to attempt a frontal assault on the Gazala positions into which the British had retreated, and with insufficient supplies to outflank to the south, began digging in opposite the enemy at Tmimi, having re-taken the greater part of the Cyrenaican 'bulge'. At the same time the Bf109Fs for the first time began undertaking fighter-bomber operations—'Jabos', while both German and Italian fighters moved closer to the new front line.

British aircraft at once undertook to attack the new arrivals, but on one such occasion on February 15th, Ofw Otto Schulz took off alone

and shot down five Kittyhawks, damaging a sixth. A few days later he and Lt Marseille were awarded the Knights' Cross, and he then returned to Europe for officer training, coming back to the Desert some weeks later, promoted to Oblt.

On February 27th 150° Gruppo MC200s and 5/JG 27 Bf109Fs strafed the British airfields at Gambut and El Adem, claiming a number of aircraft destroyed on the ground. At night, raids on British supply lines and on Tobruk were maintained mainly by He111s of II/KG 26, and by 13° Stormo BR20s, but by February the first radar-equipped Beaufighter night-fighters had arrived in Egypt, and these began inflicting regular losses on the bombers, also shooting down a number of Ju88s and Z1007bis's operating over Alexandria and the Nile Delta from Crete, Rhodes and Greece.

By the end of February JG 27, III/ZG 26, I/StG 3 and 2(H)/14 had all moved up near the front, joined by 6° and 17° Gruppi with MC202s, 3°, 8° and 150° Gruppi with MC200s, 209ª Squadriglia with Ju87Bs, 236ª Squadriglia with CR42 fighter-bombers, and by two reconnaissance squadriglie, 174ª with SM79s and 176ª with Z1007bis's. Further back, or in Crete, were the He111s and Ju88s of II/KG 26 and II/LG 1, and the BR20s of 13° Stormo, while for rear area defence and shipping duties the Italians maintained in Tripolitania 279ª and 284ª Squadriglie of SM79 torpedo-bombers, 12° Gruppo with G50s and 160° Gruppo with CR42s, 154° Gruppo of transport aircraft—SM75s, 81s and 82s—and several reconnaissance and army co-operation units with a variety of aircraft.

By April, 13° Stormo had suffered such heavy losses during its nocturnal operations that it was withdrawn to Italy to re-equip with Caproni Ca313s. During the month Fliegerführer Afrika was temporarily joined by 6/JG 3 from Sicily, but this Staffel returned on the 26th having achieved nothing of any note. At the same time the tactical reconnaissance unit, 2(H)/14, was relieved by the similarly-equipped 4(H)/12, and returned to Europe.

Throughout the early months of Spring 1942 the air over the Desert was relatively quiet, each side indulging in occasional fighter sweeps and fighter-bomber attacks, but little else. On the ground a series of outflanking manoeuvres were attempted by each side, and various minor local offensives were staged to improve certain positions, these operations usually resulting in increased aerial activity for a day or two, but little else. The continued outflanking attempts resulted in the

line gradually extending southwards until it petered out in the Desert to the south of Bir Hakeim.

By May both sides were approaching the moment when they would be ready to launch a new offensive, it being a question of chance which would be ready first. Air reinforcements were flowing in fast at this time, the British receiving the first new Liberators and Spitfires to reach the Desert, while during the month, as has already been mentioned, a strong contingent from Sicily joined Fliegerführer Afrika in the Gazala area, including III/JG 53 with 30 Bf109s, II and III/StG 3 with 40 Ju87s, and 8/ZG 26 with 15 Bf110s, bringing Luftwaffe strength to 260 aircraft in Africa.

2/NJG 2 was already at Derna to meet the increasing weight of night attack by Wellingtons from the Delta, and on May 4th one of the unit's Ju88Cs shot down one of the first Liberators to operate over the area. Now the rest of I/NJG 2 began to move over from Sicily, and 7/ZG 26 at Derna, as well as being joined by 8 Staffel from Sicily, welcomed 9 Staffel from Crete, III Gruppe then being reunited for the first time in several months. This Gruppe, with StG 3 and the Ju88s of 12/LG 1, which had recently arrived, now formed 'Gefechtsverband Sigel' for close support operations, under the overall command of Hpt Sigel, Kommodore of StG 3. One operation of particular interest occurred on May 12th, when Bf110s of 9/ZG 26 escorted a formation of 16 Ju52/3ms carrying troops from Crete to Libya; this was intercepted over the sea by a formation of Kittyhawks and Beaufighters. The British fighters played havoc with the heavy-laden transports, shooting down nine and badly damaging two more, while at least one of the escorting Bf110s was also brought down.

The day before this happened a force of four British destroyers had sailed from Alexandria charged with the duty of intercepting a convoy making for Benghazi from Southern Europe. Passing between Crete and Tobruk on the 12th, they were spotted and at once a formation of 14 Ju88s of I/LG 1 were ordered off from Crete, attacking the destroyers during the early afternoon. A near-miss badly damaged HMS *Lively*, and she sank after the bombers had left. A second attack was made by II/LG 1 without result, but when seven I/LG 1 aircraft returned to attack again, they achieved very good results, *Kipling* being sunk at once and *Jackal* badly damaged and set on fire, sinking next morning. The sole survivor, *Jervis*, returned at once to Alexandria, mission unaccomplished, with 630 survivors aboard. Hpt Joachim Helbig,

Kommandeur of I/LG 1 was awarded Oak Leaves to his Knights' Cross for this day's work.

The Regia Aeronautica was now being reinforced and brought up to strength in Africa; 13° Stormo BT had been replaced by 35° Stormo with Z1007bis bombers, and this unit was now at Barce, while 4° Stormo CT had arrived at Martuba with its MC202s. During its brief sojourn in Sicily the Stormo had suffered greatly during operations over Malta, the commander, Colonello Eugenio Leotta, the commander of 10° Gruppo, Ten Col Carlo Romagnoli, an 'ace' fighter pilot of considerable experience, and the commanding officers of three squadriglie all being lost in a matter of a few days, a fourth squadriglia losing two commanders in the same period.

At Martuba also at this time were 1° Stormo with MC202s, 2° Stormo with MC200s and 3° Gruppo Assalto with CR42 fighter-bombers. At Derna were 50° Stormo Assalto, also CR42-equipped, a section of SM82 transports, and a Z1007-equipped reconnaissance unit, while at Benghazi were 131° and 132° Gruppi Aerosiluranti with their SM79s and 150° Gruppo with MC200s.

On May 26th Rommel beat the 8th Army to the punch and began his new offensive, Italian infantry divisions starting a direct frontal assault on the northern part of the Gazala line as a diversion, whilst his armoured formations swept round south of Bir Hakeim in a classic outflanking manoeuvre, seeking to reach the administrative and command area behind the front, and there create havoc. Soft sand and minefields bogged down the two Italian armoured divisions however, and next day British armour was able to halt the German panzers at an area known as 'Knightsbridge', where a savage tank battle began that was to last several days.

Every possible bit of air support that could be scraped up was thrown into the battle by each side, and some of the heaviest air fighting yet seen over the Desert occurred during the next few desperate weeks. On the 28th British fighters were ordered to cease nearly all their air superiority patrols, and to concentrate their strength in strafing attacks on the advancing columns. This left them open to continual and almost uninterrupted attack by the Axis fighters, and the losses inflicted on them reached staggering proportions when compared to the total of forces involved. Between May 29th and 31st 39 British fighters were lost in action, but sandstorms then reduced aerial activity for a day or two.

Unexpectedly tough resistance by Free French troops dug in at Bir Hacheim was now proving a serious threat to the left flank of the supply lines to Rommel's panzers, and on June 2nd Italian forces, closely supported by the Ju87s of StG 3, struck at the area. Next day all available British fighters were diverted from the 'Knightsbridge' area to this new danger spot, where some of the fiercest fighting of the whole battle was to take place. At once on the 3rd, South African Tomahawks intercepted Ju87s of I/StG 3 and quickly inflicted heavy losses, but while so involved they were attacked from behind by Oblt Marseille of I/JG 27, who shot down five of the fighters in quick succession and damaged a sixth. Next day Tomahawks again intercepted I/StG 3 with adverse results for the German unit, which this time lost its Kommandeur, Hpt Heinrich Eppen, a Knights' Cross holder, among other pilots. The fighter escort again did its best, shooting down three Tomahawks, while one more was dealt with by the rear gunner in one of the Stukas.

CR42 fighter-bombers, escorted by MC200s, were now thrown in to assist the Stukas, the battle raging on for several more days until the gallant Frenchmen were finally forced to evacuate their battered positions under cover of darkness. British fighters and fighter-bombers were active throughout the hours of daylight alternately in this area, and over 'Knightsbridge', where the Germans were finally beginning to get the upper hand and to inflict heavy losses on the British armoured brigades.

However, the long battle at Bir Hacheim had completely upset Rommel's calculations, and the fate of the battle remained in the balance until the 13th. On that date the 90th Light Division, having rested and re-fuelled, attacked once more and succeeded in capturing El Adem, while at 'Knightsbridge' the depleted British armour began to be driven back; next day the 8th Army started a general retreat from Gazala.

At this point two convoys for Malta left Gibraltar and Alexandria to approach the island from different directions simultaneously. The one from the west was escorted by two aircraft carriers, but the one from the east counted on the air support of the hard-pressed units in the Desert. The latter convoy was at once within the range of aircraft based in Crete and Rhodes, and for this reason a sabotage team had been landed on the former island, destroying all the Ju88s of the 'crack' I/LG 1 at Heraklion; it would soon also be in range of Axis units in

Libya. The eastbound convoy would come under attack by units in Sardinia, Tripolitania, and then Sicily.

This eastbound convoy, 'Harpoon', was attacked mainly by Italian units, those in Sardinia comprising 63 torpedo-bomber, 35 bomber and reconnaissance, 68 fighter and nine fighter-bomber aircraft, principally from 9° Stormo BT (29° and 39° Gruppi), 104° Gruppo Aerosiluranti, and 16° Gruppo CT, while in Sicily were available 14 torpedo-bombers, 41 bombers, 15 Ju87s and escorting fighters. Malta had been reinforced on June 3rd when 12 Spitfires were flown off HMS *Eagle*; Pantelleria-based Bf109s intercepted these and shot down four on their way to the island. After a quiet start to the month over Malta, the critical convoys approached, and when the carriers left the 'Harpoon' convoy in the Sicilian narrows on the 14th only one merchant vessel and one destroyer had been sunk, a heavy toll of the attacking bombers having been taken by the Naval fighters. Now however, as the remaining vessels came within range of Malta's own fighters, they were heavily attacked by Sicily-based aircraft, and despite the efforts of the defending Spitfires, three more vessels were sunk, only two reaching harbour on the 16th.

Meantime the convoy from Alexandria was having an even rougher time. Torpedo-carrying SM79s of 131° and 133° Gruppi and Ju87s of III/StG 3 kept up a regular attack, as did Z1007s and Ju88s from the Aegean bases. At the same time a strong Italian naval fleet put to sea to intercept. This was spotted by a British reconnaissance aircraft, and a strike was laid on for the 15th, which was to be made by Beaufort torpedo-bombers, and by Liberators and B-24s, the latter from the American Halverson Detachment which had just arrived in the Mediterranean area from the United States. The Beauforts, escorted by Beaufighters, left Egypt, but were seen by chance by III/JG 53 as this unit moved from Africa to Athens-Eleusis airfield in Greece. The Bf109s attacked at once, shooting down two Beauforts and two Beaufighters, and damaging five more of the former, which were forced to return to land.

The remaining Beauforts attacked the Italian warships just as the Liberators and B-24s bombed from higher altitude, but no substantial damage was done. One of the B-24s, on the first USAAF mission in the area, was shot down by a patrolling Bf109 of III/JG 27. Meanwhile, the convoy was attacked by a formation of SM79 torpedo-bombers which lost two of their number to escorting fighters. By evening, with

two merchant ships and two destroyers sunk, with two thrids of the anti-aircraft ammunition already expended, and with the Italian fleet still at sea, the convoy turned back, giving up the attempt.

In the Desert meanwhile, the fighting continued, WDAF throwing in everything to slow down the pursuing Axis forces. Again the German fighters had a field day, taking a savage toll of the fighter-bombers as they strafed and bombed the soft-skinned supply vehicles so essential to keep the armoured units rolling. Strong formations of heavily-escorted light bombers—Bostons and Baltimores—were now appearing increasingly often to join in these attacks, their medium level precision bombing improving day by day. Refusing always to become involved in dogfights with the escorting Kittyhawks and Tomahawks, the German pilots were content to sit above and pick the escorts off frequently, the British fighter units often being practically decimated, while the more experienced German fighter pilots indulged themselves in a race for victories, their personal tallies rising at a meteoric rate. They failed almost entirely during these attacks, to break through to the bombers however, and never prevented the latter from carrying out their missions. At the same time their own formations of Stukas and fighter-bombers were often cut to pieces by British fighters, and although once more many of these were shot down as they attacked the bombers, by the high-flying Bf109s of the escort, the dive-bombers were frequently caused to jettison their bombs away from the targets, or their attacks were so interrupted as to be almost worthless.

An indication of the level at which the scores of German fighter pilots were rising at this time is given by Oblt Marseille, when on June 17th he claimed five victories to bring his score to 101. He was at once despatched to Germany on leave, and to receive Swords to the Oak Leaves that had already been added to his Knights' Cross. On this same date however, Oblt Otto Schulz of II/JG 27, after shooting down a Hurricane for his 51st victory, was himself shot down and killed by a Kittyhawk, the first of the great Desert 'Experten' to die.

By now the Afrika Korps was approaching the Egyptian frontier, and the German and Italian fighters began moving forward to El Adem to keep up. On June 21st, closely supported by the Ju87s, Ju88s and Bf110s of 'Gefechtsverband Sigel', and by the CR42s of the Regia Aeronautica's Assalto Gruppi, the Axis units crashed through the defences of Tobruk, which the British commander, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, had determined not to allow to again become an

isolated fortress, and in triumph the port and its defenders were captured, the forward supply of the army thus being guaranteed.

Rommel's plan had been to halt on the Egyptian frontier while an airborne invasion of Malta was undertaken to secure his supply lines, and then to press on. Now, even as this invasion was being prepared in Sicily, he decided instead, with Tobruk so swiftly in his hands, and as things generally were going so well, to carry straight on to Suez; it was a fateful decision which was to lose for the Axis the war in Africa.

The fighters now moved forward again, to Gambut, but with the long lines of communication and the demands of the panzers, fuel was again running low. They were on the move again before the end of the month, this time to Fuka, as the Afrika Korps approached the El Alamein area, the narrowest point of firm desert before Suez. Here British Commonwealth forces were digging themselves in hastily on a partially prepared line between the sea and the Qattara Depression, a vast area of impassable salt marshes in the south.

At this time RAF Wellingtons and Liberators were very active, attacking Benghazi, Tobruk, and the Sicilian airfields, where the preparations for the proposed invasion of Malta had been noted. The night-fighters of I/NJG 2 were taking a steady toll of these, and on June 23rd those of the unit's Ju88Cs which had recently been despatched to Crete, were ordered to Sicily, just four remaining in Africa for the night defence of the main ports.

Over the front there was to be no let-up for the tired air forces, as on July 1st Rommel launched his first attack on the line at El Alamein, where heavy fighting now ensued. During June the appearance over the Desert of the first Spitfires had given the Axis fighter pilots some bad moments, but they quickly discovered that the new opponents were Mark 5s, only just able to hold their own with the Bf109Fs, and in general did not appear to be flown by particularly experienced pilots. While this meant that the Messerschmitts were not now always flying above all other fighters, the Spitfires proved not to be quite the 'bogeymen' that had been feared.

Over Alamein meanwhile the Ju87s were again thrown in, and these once more suffered heavy losses in a number of combats, though the attacking fighters frequently paid very dearly. Indeed, at this period the Axis fighters enjoyed particular successes in cutting to pieces a number of formations of Hurricanes, still appearing over the front in large numbers, but still the Germans were unable to break through the

Kittyhawks to the light bombers. Indeed, it was mainly due to the continual and dedicated efforts of the WDAF in the face of terrible losses, that the 8th Army, despite heavy losses of its own, was able to retain its cohesion as a fighting unit, and to anchor itself firmly at Alamein.

The Luftwaffe now sent a small detachment of Junkers Ju86P pressurised high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft to Africa, and for some weeks these were able to fly over Alexandria and the Delta unmolested, too high for interception. However, on July 4th over the Alamein area JG 27 lost another of its successful pilots when Lt Friedrich Körner, who had claimed 36 victories in just one year, was shot down and taken prisoner.

In the middle of the month, with the line showing no signs of breaking, and with Rommel's forces exhausted by their long advance and their unavailing assault on the new defences, the WDAF launched a series of bombing and strafing attacks on the Axis forward landing grounds, and there were several great battles over these. On July 26th British forces counter-attacked in an effort to drive the Afrika Korps back to the Egyptian frontier, the fighting continuing until the end of the month without any great success being achieved.

During the month 16 more Ju88C long-range fighters had moved to Africa to join 12/LG 1, a number of them being based at Quasaba; on the night of the 27th SAS troops attacked this airfield, destroying three Ju87s, three Ju88Cs, and two Ju52/3ms, and badly damaging seven Ju87s, three Ju88Cs and a Bf110.

Following the end of the British counter-attack at the close of July, the fighting generally quietened down, both on the ground and in the air, as each side once more strove to re-equip with all speed. The Italians now divided their 5ª Squadra Aerea into three Settore instead of two, as in the past. Settore Ouest remained as before, while Settore Centrale included the night bombers and aerosiluranti, some reconnaissance units, and 150° Gruppo, now supplementing its MC200s with some 202s. Settore Est-Fuka, included all the units active over the front, 2° Stormo (8° and 13° Gruppi with MC200s), 3° Stormo (18° Gruppo with MC200s and 23° Gruppo with MC202s), 4° Stormo (9° and 10° Gruppi with MC202s), 50° Stormo Assalto (158° and 159° Gruppi with CR42s) and 191ª Squadriglia with Z1007bis's. The total strength of 5ª Squadra included 93 MC202s, 50 MC200 fighter-bombers and 46 MC200 fighters, 40 CR42s, 34 SM79 torpedo-bombers,

25 Z1007bis bombers, 43 G50bis's, 24 Ca311s, 14 Ghiblis, 17 Z501 flyingboats and six Z506B floatplanes.

Alam el Halfa

During August more American aircraft gradually began to appear as units of the USAAF joined the RAF in Egypt; following the first B-24s came more of these heavy bombers together with P-40F Warhawks and B-25 Mitchell medium bombers. Command of the 8th Army was also being changed, Lt Gen Gott being given the task of re-building and leading the Desert army. As he was flown up to the front on August 7th, the Bombay in which he was travelling was intercepted by intruding Bf109s of II/JG 27, and was shot down by Uffz Schneider. Gott was killed; his place was taken by Lt Gen Bernard Montgomery.

The increasing weight of Bomber Command's night attacks on Western Europe now led to the recall of I/NJG 2, but despite this, the German fighters were at their strongest ever, with 165 aircraft in Africa and Crete, 97 of which were serviceable. August generally was a fairly quiet month in the air, though there were a few fierce battles in the middle of the month during which the American P-40Fs were first met. With the availability of a fairly substantial number of heavy bombers capable of operating by day without escort, a number of raids were made on Crete at this time by the Allies in an effort to disrupt the air supply route that was operating via this island from Greece. Unescorted B-24s, Liberators and Halifaxes made a number of raids during the next two or three months, engaging in several spirited combats with the defenders, both sides suffering several losses. The defence of the island at this time was in the hands of III/ZG 26, less 8 Staffel which was in Africa, together with a detachment of three Bf109Fs from JG 27 known as the Kreta Jagdkommando.

Over Africa the high-flying Ju86Ps were finally intercepted by specially-stripped Spitfires, and after several skirmishes had taken place, one was shot down by these fighters during August, another being lost a few weeks later. On August 29th the two Jabostaffel, 10/JG 27 and 10/JG 53, were detached from their parent Geschwader and formed into an independent Jabo-Gruppe Afrika to operate alongside III/ZG 1 which was just arriving, equipped with Bf109Es.

Rommel was now planning a new offensive, not in the north where he had been unable to make any headway, but in the far south of the front, on the edge of the Qattara Depression, at a spot called Alam el

Halfa, where he believed the British to be only in small numbers. During the night of August 30th–31st his forces moved up to begin the attack, supported strongly by the Luftwaffe. Marseille was now back with I/JG 27, and StG 3 was in the process of converting all its Gruppen to the more modern Ju87Ds.

Unfortunately for the Afrika Korps, Montgomery had foreseen this move and had pushed strong forces down to the Alam el Halfa area, large numbers of the powerful new Grant tanks having been dug in in favourable positions. At dawn on August 31st the Axis forces attacked, large formations of escorted Ju87s bombing the British defences. Defending fighters met them in strength and WDAF formations at once began a heavy attack on the advancing columns, many violent combats being fought. Next day, September 1st, as the Axis armour struggled to make progress, the battle above became even more strenuous as everything was thrown in. In the one day 20 Allied fighters were lost, at least 12 of them being shot down by Marseille, who claimed 17 during the day; not all his victims in fact fell, some being only damaged.

Again on the 2nd the battle continued, US P-40Fs and B-25s now being fully involved also, and another ten fighters were shot down; on the ground the Afrika Korps was making no progress, and was suffering heavy tank losses to the 8th Army, together with much damage to the support vehicles due to the continual air attacks which the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica were totally unable to disrupt, despite the devastating losses they were inflicting. On the 3rd the British counter-attacked, and Rommel ordered his troops to withdraw, his tired and depleted units being back on their start line by the 5th. In the air activity tailed off after the 3rd, but in the four days August 31st–September 3rd, WDAF lost 13 bombers (mainly to flak) and 43 fighters; the continual air attacks had however been Rommel's main reason for his withdrawal, and indicated how completely the Luftwaffe tactics had failed to prevent the numerically superior enemy air forces from achieving complete superiority above the battlefield.

At this stage the pressure began to tell; despite the increased strength of the Axis fighter units, the Allied strength had grown faster. More Spitfires were appearing, and the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica pilots were finding their lives steadily made more difficult. Despite the tremendous tally of victories which was still being built up at a fantastic rate, I/JG 27 now suffered a series of losses which were to affect its

morale to such an extent that it had to be removed from the line and temporarily sent elsewhere. On September 6th Ofw Günther Steinhausen, victor of 40 combats, was shot down and killed in combat with the despised Hurricanes, although in another combat on that date five out of a formation of six of these fighters were shot down by other German pilots. Next day Spitfires shot down Lt Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, Knights' Cross holder, friend of Marseille, and with 59 victories the third-ranking 'Experte' of the whole African campaign. With him was shot down Lt Karl von Lieres, with 24 victories in Africa, who however, survived to return to his unit.

Despite this blow to the unit, fighting continued at high pressure throughout September, many raids by StG 3's Stukas being pressed home on the British positions in the face of strong fighter opposition. In one big battle on the 15th at least ten Allied fighters were shot down, about half of them by Marseille. It was not only in the air that the Axis air forces had to fear losses however, for during the night of the 14th–15th SAS commandos attacked Barce airfield, destroying a Z1007bis, six Ca311s, and SM79, a Ghibli and a Storch, damaging many others. Next day as the British troops made good their escape from the area, they came under attack by a strong force of MC200s, CR42s, SM79s and Ca311s from Settore Centrale. The Regia Aeronautica gained one outstanding success during September; British destroyers staged an attack on Tobruk, which proved to be something of a fiasco, two of the vessels being lost to air attack; one of them, *Zulu*, was sunk by MC200 fighter-bombers of 13° Gruppo.

Marseille was again to the fore on the 26th, claiming seven victories in two combats to bring his score to 158, all but seven of them in Africa. Four days later, on September 30th, his aircraft suffered a technical fault which caused the cockpit to fill with smoke. Unable to reach his base, he turned the Messerschmitt on its back and baled out over friendly territory, but struck the tailplane and fell unconscious to the ground where he was killed on impact. It was the last straw for I/JG 27, which was taken out of the line for a few days' rest, and then despatched to Sicily to operate over Malta instead.

At the same time III/ZG 1 and the Jabo-Gruppe Afrika were withdrawn, the intention being to reform them into a new Schlachtgeschwader 2, but while the Jabo-Gruppe in fact became I/SG2, III/ZG 1 was not incorporated into the new unit, and was re-equipped instead with Me210 twin-engined 'destroyers'.

Heavy rain in early October waterlogged the airfields in the Daba and Fuka area, and when British aerial reconnaissance spotted this, a series of raids was made on October 9th in an effort to destroy much of the Axis fighter force on the ground. In fact a considerable number of Bf109s and MC202s were able to get into the air during the day, and although quite a number were shot down during the fighting, they managed, with the flak gunners, to inflict heavy losses on the attackers, who lost 15 fighters and a bomber, with ten more fighters damaged. On the ground ten Axis fighters were destroyed and 20 damaged. Another leading pilot was lost on the 13th however, when Ofw Werner Stumpf of III/JG 53 was shot down and killed by anti-aircraft fire; he had been credited with 47 victories, 15 of them in Africa, and had received the Knights' Cross. A few days later the British air offensive prior to the decisive battle of El Alamein began.

Malta—End of the Siege

After the flurry of action during the arrival of the remnants of the 'Harpoon' convoy in mid June, the rest of that month had been fairly quiet on Malta, although a number of high altitude bombing raids by well-escorted formations of Z1007bis bombers had been made. Early in July the Axis air forces on Sicily attacked in force again and there was some very heavy combat, particularly during the period 6th–11th; heavy losses were inflicted on the attackers, but by the 14th the new offensive had cost the defenders 39 fighters, though 26 of the pilots were safe. At this stage 32 more Spitfires were flown off *Eagle* to the island, activity then quietening down, before rising briefly to a crescendo again at the end of the month. By this time, of the 275 Spitfires delivered to the island since the beginning of March, only 80 were left.

In Sicily at this time, the Regia Aeronautica had melted away with the call of other fronts; 2° Gruppo had moved its Re2001s to Sardinia in anticipation of another convoy being forced through to the island, while other units had, or were about to move on to the Desert; only 25° Gruppo BT with SM84s and 169ª Squadriglia CT with MC200s remained. Luftwaffe units were gradually drifting back however, and a powerful force of Ju88s was once more building up.

August began relatively quietly, but as the Italians had anticipated, another convoy was indeed underway, and it was the biggest and most strongly-defended yet. Codenamed Operation 'Pedestal', the convoy was to be pressed through if humanly possible. In Africa the

8th Army was right back at El Alamein, trying to build up for a new offensive more quickly than the Axis could; Malta itself was never more alone, and was now patently in danger of invasion; it was still the only bastion from which the main Axis supply lines might be interrupted effectively.

Four aircraft carriers, *Victorious*, *Indomitable*, *Eagle* and *Furious*, carrying between them more than 70 deck-landing fighters, the latter also bringing 38 more Spitfires for the beleaguered island, were to escort the convoy, which was first seen by Axis reconnaissance sources steaming from Gibraltar early on August 11th. That afternoon the Spitfires flew off *Furious*, but *Eagle* was then torpedoed by U-73, and sank.

The Italians had prepared everything possible to meet this convoy, and 74 SM79 torpedo-bombers were ready, 60 of them with 60° and 105° Stormi in Sardinia, and 14 with 132° Gruppo on Pantelleria. The latter unit was a particularly notable one, commanded by Italy's greatest torpedo-bomber pilot, Capt Buscaglia. The SM79 torpedo aircraft had been particularly successful throughout the Mediterranean convoy battles, they and their crews gaining the same prominence in the hearts and minds of the Italian population that was generally reserved for fighter pilots in Germany and the Allied nations. Other units on hand for the forthcoming operations included 2° Gruppo CT with Re2001s, and a number of bomber and reconnaissance units both in Sardinia and Tripolitania. When the convoy got nearer to Sicily, the Ju88s would take up the attack.

The first air attack was made during the evening of the 11th, and next day they were kept up non-stop, although the fleet fighters managed to break up the majority of the attacks and inflict several losses, so that only one merchant ship was lost throughout the day. By dusk the fighters were down to half strength, 13 having been lost in action during the day, and others damaged, or destroyed by other operational causes, apart from those which had gone down with *Eagle*. At this point a force of 100 bombers struck as the convoy entered the Sicilian Narrows, the carrier *Indomitable* being hit and badly damaged.

Despite this, 13 merchant ships remained afloat, but as night fell Italian motor torpedo-boats attacked vigorously, sinking four cargo ships and the cruiser *Manchester*, while U-boats sank the AA cruiser *Cairo* and damaged two more cruisers. By now the carriers had turned

back, and as dawn arrived cover to the convoy was provided by Malta-based units, first by Beaufighters and then by Spitfires. In the face of heavy and determined opposition the German and Italian bombers and torpedo-bombers again bored in, four more cargo ships being sunk and two others very badly damaged, these and the three other survivors reaching Grand Harbour, where 32,000 tons of supplies, including the aviation fuel aboard the tanker *Ohio*, were unloaded, ensuring Malta's continued survival for the time being.

The heavy losses suffered by the Axis units during this operation, together with the further reinforcements of Spitfires, caused the rest of the month to remain rather quiet. Indeed, for the first time the Spitfires were able to undertake sweeps over Sicily, while Beaufighters, which were inhabiting the island in growing numbers, attacked airfields in Sardinia. The sweeps by the Spitfires provoked a strong reaction on August 27th when there was a big battle over Southern Sicily, several fighters being shot down on either side. Towards the end of the month a further 32 Spitfires were flown off to Malta, making the defences there by far the strongest they had ever been.

During September very little activity by the Axis was undertaken over the island, and the strike force there again began to grow, with consequent deleterious effects on the supply convoys sailing from Sicily and Italy to Benghazi and Tobruk. In the absence of further regular attacks, the Spitfires continued to make occasional sweeps over the Sicilian airfields, some even carrying bombs on these missions.

The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica were however girding up their loins for a new all-out assault on the island, and during September strength had grown considerably. Stab and II/JG 53 had been joined during the summer by I/JG 77 from Russia; Stab, I, II and III/KG 54, and Stab and I/KG 77 were available with Ju88s, the rest of KG 77 being in Crete. By early October I/JG 53 had returned from Russia, and other units of Ju88s were to reach the area during October, amongst them I and III/KG 26, III/KG 30 and units of KG 60.

The Italians now moved to Sicily three Gruppi of Z1007bis, three of MC202s, one of Re2001s and one of Ju87s. On October 8th I/JG 27 arrived from the Desert, and II/StG 3 also flew in from here. On the 11th the new assault opened, strong formations of Ju88s heavily escorted by Bf109s, MC202s and Re2001s pouring over the island again and again during a five-day period. This time however the escorting fighters found themselves completely unable to subdue the

defending fighters as they had in the past, and the Spitfires speedily gained the upper hand. While severe losses were inflicted upon them, they were able to cause such a crippling rate of attrition to the bomber units that Kesselring was forced after the 16th to order that the Ju88s should in future operate over the island only by night. About the same level of losses had been inflicted on the fighters, but these had been more or less equally divided between Germans and Italians, while the Luftwaffe had borne the full weight of the bomber losses; the Ju87s had not even been committed to battle, so great was the degree of British fighter opposition that was met over the target.

From the 17th on, only fighter sweeps were flown in an effort to lure up the Spitfires and whittle away their strength, but in fact losses tended the other way, and within a few days activity had tailed off to a desultory level. On the 26th I/JG 27 returned to the Desert, where heavy fighting had broken out at El Alamein; the unit had come off quite well, claiming seven Spitfires shot down for the loss of two Bf109s during its brief stay in Sicily.

No further big raids were to be made, and by early November the siege was virtually over due to the happenings in North Africa, of which more later. By this time the assault on the island had cost the Germans and Italians at least 567 combat losses, as follows:—

Regia Aeronautica	*1940*	*1941*	*1942 (to 8th Nov)*	*Total*
Bombers	23	32	58	113
Fighters	12	38	47	97
Luftwaffe				
Bombers	—	80	172	252
Fighters	—	6	99	105
Total	35	156	376	567

The Battle of El Alamein

The British air offensive prior to the opening of the next major battle on the Alamein line began on October 19th, as has already been mentioned, and next day a further big series of attacks was launched on the Daba and Fuka airfields. Axis fighters again got into the air, shooting down 11 British fighters for the loss of an equal number of their own, though two more were destroyed on the ground, and 15 were damaged. A third attack followed on the 23rd, but with less result.

Just before midnight on the night of October 23rd–24th the British artillery barrage opened up, and the new battle began, forces in the northern sector of the front facing an attempted breakthrough close to the coast by strong forces of Allied infantry, supported by tanks. At once Ju87s and CR42s were thrown in to support the defending troops, and very heavy fighting began once more.

Ju52/3ms carrying reinforcements and fuel were again intercepted by Beaufighters between Crete and Africa on the 25th, and despite an escort of Bf110s, four were lost. The Axis air forces had begun the battle with the following units:—

Luftwaffe—Fliegerführer Afrika	
4(H)/12	Bf109E & Bf110
1(F)/121	Ju88D
Stab, II & III/JG 27	Bf109F
III/JG 53	Bf109F
I/SG 2	Bf109E
8/ZG 26	Bf110

10/ZG 26	Ju88C & Do17Z
12/LG 1	Ju88C
Stab, I & III/StG 3	Ju87B & Ju87D

Regia Aeronautica—5ª Squadra, Settore Est and Centrale

2° Stormo CT	Macchi MC200	(8° & 13° Gruppi)
3° Stormo CT	Macchi MC202	(18° & 23° Gruppi)
4° Stormo CT	Macchi MC202	(9° & 10° Gruppi)
150° Gruppo Autonomo	Macchi MC202	
160° Gruppo Autonomo	Fiat CR42	
15° Stormo Assalto	Fiat CR42	(46° & 47° Gruppi)
50° Stormo Assalto	Fiat CR42	(158° & 159° Gruppi)
5° Stormo BaT	Ju87B	(101° Gruppo)
35° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	(86° & 95° Gruppi)
131° Gruppo Aerosiluranti	Savoia SM79sil	
133° Gruppo Aerosiluranti	Savoia SM79sil	

This included the same collection of reconnaissance and army co-operation units in the centre and rear, and one gruppo of Fiat G50bis's for rear area defence.

WDAF fighters were always over the front in strength, and once more heavy losses were suffered by the Stukas, and by the CR42s of the assault units. On the 26th in one raid StG 3 lost the Kommandeur of III Gruppe, Knights' Cross holder Hpt Kurt Welter, and on the same day a convoy bringing fuel for the aircraft and panzers was sunk by the RAF within sight of Benghazi harbour.

I/JG 27 returned from Sicily on the 27th, accompanied by I/JG 77; III/JG 53 then returned to join the rest of the Geschwader on the island. I/JG 77 was led by Hpt Heinz Bär, a recipient of the Knights' Cross with Oakleaves, who had recently arrived from Russia to take over the Gruppe, and who already had nearly 120 victories to his credit. In the unit were two more Knights' Cross holders, Hpt Fritz Geisshardt with over 90 victories, and Oblt Siegfried Freytag with over 70. The latter had in a few short weeks become the most successful of all German fighter pilots operating against Malta; the Gruppe itself at this time had more than 900 victories credited to it. Next day the Kommodore of JG 77, Major Joachim Müncheberg, no stranger to the Mediterranean area, and now with more than 100 victories, arrived direct from the Eastern Front, and with him came III/JG 77 which also boasted a number of very experienced and high-scoring

pilots, and was commanded by Hpt Kurt Ubben, Knights' Cross and 95 victories.

Operations continued at full spate; on October 26th the Germans had launched a counter-attack in the north, but this failed with heavy losses. The attempt was repeated on the 31st, but the result was the same—a bloody repulse. The newly-arrived Jagdgruppen were at once in action, trying to protect their own troops from the continual air attacks which hammered them whenever they attempted to form up for a new counter-attack, and also giving what support could be provided to the vulnerable and long-suffering Stukas, which were desperately thrown in again and again.

Montgomery had now changed his plan, and while he reinforced the northern sector of the front, he no longer planned to break out here, using it instead to draw off the Axis reserves, and as a striking plate against which the Afrika Korps could batter itself to pieces in a terrible battle of attrition. On November 2nd New Zealand infantry attacked the Italian-held lines in the middle of the front, taking Rommel by surprise and breaking through. Allied armour poured through the gap, but ran up against a formidable anti-tank gun screen, which repulsed the tanks with appalling losses. Rommel at once realised the significance of this move, and seeing that it could only be a matter of time before the Allied armour got through and outflanked his forces, ordered the start of a withdrawal towards the Egyptian frontier.

As the first Axis units moved off on November 3rd, Stukas again appeared over the front, and were savagely attacked by Hurricanes; I/JG 77 was providing the escort, and dived down to engage in its first really big combat in Africa, cutting one British squadron to pieces by shooting down six of the Hurricanes. Next day however the break-through from the centre of the front really got under way, and the Axis withdrawal became general and desperate, much of the Italian infantry being left behind with no transport. Allied air attacks were shifted on to the massed columns fleeing along the coast road, and while the Messerschmitts and Macchis did what they could, they were soon forced to abandon their own forward airfields as the advancing British armoured units approached. Now too, fuel was once more becoming critical, and Ju52/3ms were ordered to fly in supplies from Crete; one such formation was intercepted on the 7th and suffered four losses.

To make matters worse, on November 8th came the news of the new Allied landings in French North Africa, which now posed a threat to

the rear of the Axis in Libya, and also meant that much of the available reinforcements and supplies would now have to be directed to Tunisia, instead of coming to the Afrika Korps.

By the 11th all Axis units were out of Egypt and across the Halfaya Pass, heading back across Cyrenaica with all speed, leaving only rear-guards to delay the pursuit. On this date I/StG 3, which was once more attempting to delay the forward Allied columns, was very badly mauled by Kittyhawks and P-40s, the Kommandeur, Oblt Martin Mossdorf, being shot down and taken prisoner, most other serviceable Ju87s also being lost, together with a number of Ju52/3ms which were using the same airfield.

Following the arrival of the two Gruppen of JG 77, I and III/JG 27 were now ordered to leave Africa, I Gruppe to return to Germany, and III Gruppe to go to Greece and Crete; all serviceable aircraft were handed to the units remaining in Africa. Since its arrival in April 1941, I Gruppe had claimed 588 victories, while III Gruppe had, since December 1941, claimed 160. With the latter unit went Oblt Werner Schroer, the highest-scoring surviving fighter pilot of the campaign with 61 victories; Hpt Gerhard Homuth of I Gruppe had added only another six during the year, to bring his score to 46.

The retreat continued throughout November, the British retaking Tobruk on the 13th and reaching Gazala a few days later. Shortage of fuel and continual changing of bases reduced the Axis air units to a low level of activity during the month, but still the fighters continued to get into the air whenever possible and to take a steady toll of the endless Allied formations.

Benghazi was in imminent danger by the 17th, and while demolition took place, transport aircraft arrived to fly out as much as possible in the way of vital supplies and key personnel, numbers of He111s being pressed into service to join the Ju52/3ms and Italian trimotors on these duties. British fighters were now operating from Gazala, within range of the port, and during the day these came over frequently, shooting down a number of He111s and destroying other transports on the ground. Next day they were back, at least eight transports—German and Italian—being shot down, and others strafed, but on the 19th British troops had reached the port and the slaughter ended.

Towards the end of November III/ZG 1 returned from Italy with its new Me210s, joined by a small batch of the first Henschel Hs129B 'tank-busters', which at once went into action. At this stage the Luft-

waffe could still put 43 Bf109s into the air, these being the number serviceable from a total of 81 with the Jagdgruppen, Schlachtgruppen, and 4(H)/12, while the Italians still had a fair quantity of MC202s on hand. One of their pilots, Ten Franco Bordoni-Bisleri, a pilot in 18° Gruppo of 3° Stormo CT, had been doing very well of late, claiming seven swift victories during October and November to bring his personal score in the Desert to 12—the most successful Italian fighter pilot of the African campaigns. Late in November however, he was involved in a road accident, and was invalided home to Italy.

By the close of November the Axis had again reached the easily-defensible Agheila line, and here the 8th Army also halted to build up supplies, and await the clearing of Benghazi's harbour which was necessary before it could be put into use. December began quietly both in the air and on the ground, but the 5th saw the arrival of II/JG 77 to bring the Geschwader in Africa to full strength. This Gruppe also came direct from Russia, and was under the command of Hpt Anton Mader, Knights' Cross holder with over 50 victories; like the other Gruppen it contained a good share of 'Experten', and had already claimed 1,300 victories in the East. 5 Staffel was led by Hpt Anton Hackl, who with 188 victories, Knights' Cross and Oakleaves, was at this stage the Geschwader's most successful pilot.

II/JG 27 was now about to leave, gaining its final victory next day to bring its African total to 417, and JG 27's as a whole on this front to 1,166—the Stab had claimed one victory—the Gruppe's most successful pilot being its Kommandeur, Hpt Gustav Rödel, who had claimed 52 over the Desert. The other unit to operate regularly in African skies, III/JG 53, had claimed 113.

Meanwhile JG 77 was now getting the measure of the British and Americans, and the personal scores of several pilots were growing fast at this time—notably Bär, Müncheberg and Geisshardt. Apart from desultory combats between opposing fighter and fighter-bomber formations, few big combats occurred during December however. On the 21st British fighters suddenly attacked the airfield at Hun, where a number of German and Italian aircraft were destroyed, and on the 30th Kittyhawks twice turned the tables on the Bf109s of JG 77 and I/SG 2, at least four being shot down without loss to the British fighters.

Before the 8th Army could launch an attack on the line at El Agheila, Rommel pulled back his forces nearer to Tripoli. For some

time the Allied air forces had moved up only fighter and fighter-bomber units near the front, but now the availability of more landing ground and supplies to service them, led to the move forward of many more units, including some of the light bomber squadrons, and on January 13th, 1943 a heavy attack by Baltimores and Kittyhawks was launched on the Axis airfield at Bir Dufan. JG 77 rose to give battle, and on this occasion managed to break through to the bombers and shoot down three of them, at least six escorting Kittyhawks and P-40s also being destroyed. Next day Bostons and B-25s repeated the attack, and on this occasion the Axis fighters again reached the bombers, claiming two B-25s, no less than 12 Kittyhawks from the escort also being shot down by the attacking Bf109s and MC202s.

Rommel was now determined to cut his losses and get right out of Libya, to take up positions in the old French Mareth Line, which had been constructed before the war just across the border in Southern Tunisia. On the 18th, whilst his rearguards still denied Tripoli to the British, the first troops of the Afrika Korps crossed into Tunisia and moved into these new defences. With only limited airfield space available to them, and with Tripolitania about to be given up, the Regia Aeronautica decided to keep only the front line fighters in Africa, and by January 19th all the CR42s, Z1007bis's, SM79s, Ca312s and 313s, Ghiblis and transport aircraft, and a substantial number of the MC200s and 202s had returned to Italy, a total of 180 aircraft being withdrawn.

Remaining in Africa were 3° and 4° Stormi, and 13° Gruppo with Macchi fighters; Fliegerführer Afrika had JG 77, I/SG 2, I and III/StG 3, 4(H)/12 and 1(F)/121. The remaining 'zerstroer' Staffeln had moved to Sicily to escort transport aircraft to Tunis. At this stage the 8th Army moved forward again, and on January 22nd entered Tripoli, moving up to the Tunisian frontier immediately thereafter. Here it halted facing the Mareth Line, and for several weeks the build-up of supplies was begun all over again in preparation for an assault on this formidable obstacle.

'Operation Torch'

On November 8th 1942 Anglo-American forces poured ashore in French North Africa, at Oran and Algiers on the Mediterranean coast, and at Casablanca on the Atlantic. Resistance by the Vichy French

forces was generally light, and was quickly over, the whole operation taking the Axis completely by surprise. Feldmarschall Kesselring acted with commendable speed and determination however, sending German troops in Ju52/3ms from Sicily to Tunisia next day, taking over Tunis's El Aouina airport before the local French could decide what they should do. At the same time the Bf109s of I/JG 53 and the Ju87s of II/StG 3, which were still on the island, were also sent over to back up the ground forces. Every available transport shuttled backwards and forwards across the narrow stretch of sea, ferrying in troops at top speed, and within a few days a substantial force had been organised here.

Meanwhile on the evening of the 9th every available bomber was put into the air to attack the only landings within reach, those at Algiers. Beyond the range of fighter escort, the 30 Ju88s and He111s from various Gruppen of KG 26, 30, 54 and 77 swept in just before darkness fell, to be met by Hurricanes and Spitfires which had already arrived from Gibraltar, and which intercepted the bombers with great effect, at least eight being shot down, and all the others damaged.

The British now pushed forward another landing force to the small port of Bougie, also rushing up fighters, and here several more unescorted daylight raids were made during the next few days, further losses being suffered. Other bombers returned to Algiers by night, joined by Z1007bis's, SM79s and SM84s from Sardinia and Sicily. On the 11th the first Italian aircraft reached Tunisia, MC202s of 155° Gruppo flying in, while others moved to Sardinia from where they might escort Sicily-based Re2001 fighter-bombers over the area. III/JG 53 moved to Tunisia next day, but already the transports were suffering heavy losses to Beaufighters from Malta, which frequently intercepted the flow of Ju52/3ms, Ju90s and SM82s.

The Luftwaffe's bomber Gruppen made heavy raids on Bougie on both the 12th and 13th, but once more were badly cut about. During the 12th German paratroops were loaded into Ju52/3ms and flown to Bone in an effort to forestall the British, who were now moving fast through the coastal hills towards this port, and on to Tunis. The formation arrived just in time to see the last parachutes of a British force which had been carried to the area in American C-47s, reaching the ground; the Germans were forced to return to Tunis.

More aerial reinforcements were being rushed to the area; II/JG 51 arrived from Russia with Bf109s on the 14th, going straight to Tunis,

while a few days later II/JG 2 from Western France flew in with the first Fw190s to reach the Mediterranean. On the 17th II/JG 53 moved across, though III/JG 53 now returned to Sicily to provide the air defence of the air bases there. III/ZG 26 moved fully to the island also, to escort the transport aircraft and the surface vessels carrying reinforcements and supplies, while III/ZG 2 with Bf109E fighter-bombers moved to Tunis for ground support operations.

By mid November Luftwaffe strength in the Mediterranean had risen to 1,361 aircraft, while the Regia Aeronautica with over 2,000 was still a force to be reckoned with. For the Germans the position was ironic; for months the Mediterranean had been starved of supplies, equipment, men and aircraft at a time when that extra bit could have made all the difference between victory and defeat. Now that disaster threatened, everything that had been begged for in the past was poured in, too late to do more than delay the inevitable. Air strength was now as follows:—

	Italy & Sicily	*Tunisia*	*Libya*	*Greece & Crete*	*Albania & Yugoslav*	*Total*
Luftwaffe						
Fighters (Bf 109 & Fw190)	15	95	50	12	—	172
Destroyers (Bf110 & Me210)	20	—	—	40	—	60
Bombers (Ju88A)	190	—	—	65	—	255
Torpedo-bombers (He111)	54	—	—	20	—	74
Long range reconnaissance (Ju88D)	38	—	4	16	—	58
Stukas (Ju87)	—	30	50	—	—	80
Tactical reconnaissance (Bf109)	—	12	8	—	—	20
Transports (Ju52/3m)	480	—	—	140	—	620
Transports (Ju90, Me323)	22	—	—	—	—	22
Total	819	137	112	293	—	1,361

	Italy, Sicily, Tunisia & Sardinia				
Regia Aeronautica					
Fighters (MC200 & 202, G50, Re2001, CR42)	422	232	127	15	796
Night fighters (CR42, Do217J)	59	—	—	—	59

	Italy, Sicily, Tunisia & Sardinia				
Regia aeronautica					
Bombers (Z1007bis, BR20, SM79, SM84)	223	22	30	34	309
Torpedo-bombers (SM79sil)	97	39	11	—	147
Heavy Bombers (PB108)	7	—	—	—	7
Reconnaissance (SM79, SM84, Ca314 & CR25)	44	—	—	—	44
Stukas (Ju87)	20	—	—	—	20
Total	872	293	168	49	1,382

In addition there were 290 aircraft with the flyingboat and floatplane units (Z501, Z506B and Fiat RS14), and 244 with the army co-operation units (Ca311, 313, 314 and BR20), plus transport aircraft and the navy's catapult aircraft (Ro43 and 44). Of the 1,916 aircraft listed, 1,185 were serviceable. However, a very large proportion of the units in metropolitan Italy—particularly those in the north and centre—would take no further part in the fighting.

Apart from meeting the usual British and American fighters, fighter-bombers and light and medium bombers in Tunisia, the German and Italian fighters now encountered the first regular escorted raids by formations of American B-17 Flying Fortress four-engined bombers, the first such attack being made on Tunis on November 16th from airfields around Oran; the bombers were escorted by long-range P-38 Lightning fighters.

By this time, however, the fighters in Tunisia were able to achieve an early measure of ascendency over the Allied air forces; this was due in part to the employment of Fw190s which were far superior to the Spitfire 5s in action in Africa, and partly to the fact that the forward airfields around Bone occupied by the RAF were waterlogged and possessed no radar or proper early-warning system, whilst the Axis enjoyed good all-weather airfields and adequate warning, and consequently were usually in a position to retain the initiative.

Of the American fighters appearing, the Axis pilots already had the measure of the P-40s, while the P-38s, although fast and heavily armed, were flown by 'green' pilots, usually unable to get the best out of their aircraft, and unaware of the proper tactics to use against their opponents; as a result they quickly suffered some very severe casualties to German fighters, particularly those of II/JG 51.

But, not everything was going well for the Axis in the air, as the transport units continued to suffer heavy losses to Malta's fighters. A special unit, Lufttransportstaffel See 222, equipped with all the Blohm und Voss Bv222 six-engined giant flyingboats that had so far been built, had been sent to the Mediterranean to join in the air supply flights, and on November 24th one of these, Bv222V-6, was intercepted by Beaufighters and shot down. At night the bombers initially met no real resistance as the RAF night-fighters had been despatched without their radar equipment for security reasons. After a particularly heavy raid on Algiers had destroyed a substantial number of British and American aircraft on the ground at Maison Blanche, radar-equipped aircraft were rushed in from Egypt, and during the night of the 27th–28th five He111s were shot down by these.

Both sides were pouring supplies in as fast as possible now, but the Allied lines of communication were very long and tenuous, and the Axis were in a position to launch a counter-attack before sufficient strength had been built up to allow the British to break out on to the Plain of Tunis. On December 1st the counter-attack was launched in the Tebourba area, and a long, arduous battle in the hills began. In the air very heavy fighting occurred, with substantial losses on both sides.

Luftwaffe units achieved a notable victory on the 4th when a formation of 11 Bristol Bisley bombers without escort were sent in to attack forward airfields, relying on a fighter sweep over the area at the same time to draw off the defenders. While some Bf109s engaged the Spitfires of the sweep, 60 more fighters from I and II/JG 53 and II/JG 2, were able to intercept the bombers, which they identified as American Bostons, and to shoot down every one. Thereafter the Bisleys were relegated to night flying only.

Another of the giant Bv222s, this time V-8, was shot down by Beaufighters on the 10th, but by now other large Axis aircraft were appearing over the area. The single Italian squadriglia of four-engined Piaggio P-108B bombers, 274ª, had moved to Sardinia to join the Z1007bis's on night raids, while SM79s and 84s from here continued to attack Allied supply convoys at sea by day. Towards the end of the month more Italian fighters moved in, 6° Gruppo with MC202s, 384ª Squadriglia with MC200s and 368ª Squadriglia with G50bis's all having arrived by early January 1943; the Ju88Cs of II/NJG 2 also moved to Tunis to defend the area against the increasing weight of

British night raids now directed against the port and airfields at this city, and at neighbouring Bizerta.

During late December British troops had launched a new attack in an effort to reach Tunisia, but it had come to an early halt, not so much due to Axis resistance, as to appalling weather, the winter of 1942/43 in North Africa proving to be the worst for many years. The front line then settled down a few miles from the Plain of Tunis, remaining relatively static until the Spring, while the main centres of action shifted elsewhere.

On New Year's Day 1943 heavy raids by Ju87s, Fw190s and Bf109s were launched on Bone harbour, the nearest supply port to the front for the Allies, and during these attacks four defending Spitfires were shot down. Another similar raid was made next morning, this time the Allied fighters being caught at a particular disadvantage and seven of them shot down, though the losses to the Stukas were not light.

By this time American and French troops had moved forward in the area to the south of the British 1st Army, and were threatening central Tunisia; their advance was brought to a halt without too much trouble, but heavy fighting in the skies over the Thelepte area then began. Early in this fighting, on January 15th, a large formation of Ju88s from Gruppen of KG 54, 76 and 77 attempted to attack the main American airfield at Thelepte, but suffered a severe rebuff from intercepting P-40s, which shot down nine of the bombers and damaged others. Fw190s and Bf109s then began regular operations over the area, swiftly taking a very heavy toll of the American aircraft there—notably P-39s, P-40s and A-20s. A combat of particular success for II/JG 51 occurred on February 2nd when Ju87s which its Bf109s were escorting were attacked by P-40s, five of the American fighters being shot down. In the north on January 18th, a new offensive was launched against the British, but was opposed by airborne troops who brought it to a halt, after which the operation petered out.

The Last Battles in Africa

By February 1943 Rommel and the Afrika Korps were fully within Tunisia, firmly entrenched behind the Mareth Line. Surveying the situation, the Axis Supreme Command at once realised that the rear of Rommel's army was seriously threatened by the American forces on the western border of the country, and that an advance from that

direction by these forces could well reach the coast in the area of Sfax, cutting the Afrika Korps off from its main remaining supply route to the north. It would be some time before the 8th Army was in a position to launch a major attack on the Mareth Line, and in the meantime the opportunity to clear this flank should be taken. Consequently the line was left in the hands of the infantry and their supporting units, and an Afrika Korps Assault Group was ordered north to attack Gafsa and advance on Thelepte. Von Arnim's forces had already captured Kairouan and Fondouk early in January, and they were now to attack towards Faid and Sbeitla; this attack was codenamed Operation 'Frühlingswind' (Spring Breeze) and was to begin on February 14th, while that of the Afrika Korps force was code-named 'Morgenluft' (Morning Air), and was to start two days later.

Unfortunately for the Axis there was as yet no overall tactical command in Africa, and von Arnim, who did not get on particularly well with Rommel, viewed the attack as less of an ambitious thrust than did the latter. When Rommel was given tactical control of the whole operation, von Arnim failed to co-operate adequately, holding on to units that could have swung the balance, but which he felt it necessary to retain further north. Newly-arrived 'Tiger' tanks fell particularly into this category.

Against the inexperienced Americans and poorly-armed French, the Axis veterans achieved immediate success, sweeping aside all opposition and entering the Kasserine Pass, threatening the whole Allied right flank. Closely supported by units of Fliegerführer Afrika, now operating over Tunisia for the first time, and by the units already based near the central front, the advance was initially an unqualified success, and the USAAF suffered some very severe losses at the hands of the Luftwaffe. Allied reinforcements were thrown into the battle, and British Army units were rushed down from the north, the line being stabilised by a multi-national force after some hard fighting. Worried by the speed with which his opponents were reinforced, and by the growing strength now facing him, while also fearing to become embroiled in a long battle in the mountains which would leave the Mareth Line in a weak state, Rommel now decided that he must cut his losses and he secretly withdrew his troops on the 23rd. Within two days the Allies had re-occupied all the ground they had lost.

Just too late, an offensive was mounted in the north, but was beaten back, and at the same time an overall command for the forces in Africa

was instituted. Ill and dispirited, Rommel returned to Europe, and the post went to von Arnim. The Afrika Korps was taken over by an Italian, Generale Giovanni Messe, and was restyled 1st Italian Army. For the Allies the Kasserine Pass battle proved in many ways to be beneficial; their own fragmented command structure was thoroughly overhauled, strategic and tactical supreme commanders being appointed, and the chastened Americans, who had rather expected to sweep all before them, became much more ready to listen to the advice of their more experienced allies.

Even as the 1st Italian Army moved back to its defensive positions at Mareth, the WDAF launched the start of its air offensive on the Line on February 26th, prior to the 8th Army's impending attack. On this day, however, 13 Kittyhawks were shot down and others damaged, mostly by Bf109s of JG 77.

Early in March the Regia Aeronautica's 6° Gruppo of MC202s moved down from central Tunisia to the Mareth area, but at this stage the G50bis's and some of the MC200s left Tunisia for Sardinia and Sicily. On this latter island II/JG 27, rested and re-equipped, returned to action, joining III/JG 53 for operations over Malta, and the sea lanes between Europe and Africa. Over northern Tunisia the RAF had introduced a few of the much-improved Spitfire 9s, which at once began to give the Axis fighters some problems, but at almost the same time the aircraft best able to cope with these new opponents, the Fw190s of II/JG 2, returned to Western France. More of these aircraft were soon in Tunisia however, for late in the month II/SG 2 arrived equipped with them for ground attack work, but this unit lacked the highly-experienced fighter pilots of the Gruppe from the famous 'Richthofen' Geschwader. At this same time 7° Gruppo with MC202s joined with 16° Gruppo to form a new 54° Stormo CT, though the Italians were now becoming very short of the Macchi fighters in Africa.

There was continued heavy action both over Mareth and on the central front during the month, the Allied air forces continuing to suffer some heavy blows, as on March 13th when Bf109s of JG 77 shot down four P-40s of the WDAF during the morning, and destroyed a complete formation of seven P-39s over the Thelepte area in the afternoon. Ju87s of StG 3 were still being employed, particularly over this latter area, where they were frequently mauled by American fighters.

The 8th Army's frontal attack on the Mareth Line began on March 21st, and heavy fighting again flared, the British and American air forces in the north and centre coming out in force in an effort to divert the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica units that might otherwise have been sent south to assist the hard-pressed 1st Italian Army and Fliegerführer Afrika. Even as the attack on the line got underway, a column of New Zealand troops was threading its way through the hills on the Axis right flank, making for the Tebaga Gap at El Hama. As soon as substantial Axis reserves had been committed to the Mareth area, Montgomery swung his main armoured force after the New Zealanders, and on the 26th, under cover of a violent fighter-bomber attack on defending artillery and anti-tank positions, the British broke through with only light losses, and poured out into Southern Tunisia, threatening to cut off the units still manning the Mareth defences.

Fighting desperately, the German armour just managed to hold the 8th Army off long enough to allow the rest of the force to escape, all then retreating northwards towards the next defensible line.

By now the continual Allied attacks by sea and air on the shipping attempting to supply the forces in Tunisia had created a critical supply problem, while the Axis air forces, now grotesquely outnumbered by the ever-growing Allied air power, were driven back into a steadily shrinking area. On April 6th American troops from the central front first made contact with patrols from the 8th Army moving northwards in pursuit of the retreating Axis armies, and the encirclement by the sea on two sides and the Allied armies on the other two, was now complete.

Spitfire 9s were now appearing in the south, and in the north their numbers were growing steadily, while the American fighter pilots, having learned their lessons the hard way, were now employing tactics which reduced their own losses and caused those of the Axis to rise. B-17s from the west and B-24s from the east appeared overhead in steadily larger formations, striking now not only at Tunis, but also at the supply bases and airfields in Sicily and Southern Italy, where a growing number of fighters had to be tied down on defensive duties as a consequence. This combination of factors was to lead to a very sharp increase in Axis fighter losses, particularly amongst the Luftwaffe units, during April.

Early in the month bombers continued to operate over the fronts, but on the 3rd III/StG 3 was very badly hit by American Spitfires over

El Guettar, withdrawing to Sicily shortly afterwards. Six days later Ju88s were sent in to attack Kairouan, but were intercepted by the same opponents and suffered very heavy losses. After this, the fighting in Tunisia was left to the fighters and fighter-bombers, the preponderance of Allied fighters making any but night operations too hazardous for other types. At this time too, the last MC200s left for Sicily, and indeed, the supply and replacement situation for the Italians was becoming so desperate, that only 7° Gruppo was able to continue operating in Africa.

With so few ships able to get through the Allied blockade, every possible transport aircraft was assembled in Sicily, and great fleets of these aircraft, escorted by all available fighters, began flying across to Tunisia carrying fuel, ammunition, and other essential supplies. Learning of this traffic, the Allies organised patrols of long-range P-38s, Beaufighters and B-25 medium bombers. These made their first interceptions on April 5th, P-38s catching a large escorted formation of Ju52/3ms, shooting down 14 transports and several fighters. On the 10th another big formation was again caught by the Lightnings, at least 11 Italian Savoias being shot down together with some German aircraft, while next day 18 more Ju52/3ms were lost.

Meanwhile, after a short stand at the Wadi Halfa, 1st Italian Army had retreated right up to northern Tunisia, taking up positions in the foothills of high ground at Enfidaville. Here the 8th Army encountered terrain entirely alien to it, and was unable to make headway when it attempted to press on into Tunis. WDAF had also moved up, and its Kittyhawks, P-40s and Spitfires now joined in the hunt for transports and shipping over the sea to the north of Cape Bon. On April 18th the worst losses of the whole African campaign were suffered by the Luftwaffe when a large formation of American P-40s intercepted a vast flock of Ju52/3ms heading for Sicily low over the sea at sunset. 24 transports fell blazing into the water while 35 more managed to reach the coast to crash-land, ten of the escorting fighters also being lost; the escorts managed to shoot down six P-40s in return.

Next day further substantial numbers of Ju52/3ms were lost to Kittyhawks, while on the 22nd more of these fighters shot down 16 massive six-engined Me323s. Such losses just could not be borne, and the transport pilots were ordered to fly in singly by night, landing as best they might on the few remaining airfields around Tunis.

Indeed, these airfields were coming under continual air attack, and operations from them were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. On the 20th II/JG 51 left for Sardinia, and a well-earned rest, I and II/JG 53 returning to Sicily, from where they continued to operate daily over the front. Only JG 77 and 7° Gruppo now remained in Africa.

It was at this stage, on April 22nd, that the last great Allied offensive began. Allied air power was now overwhelming, and while the remaining fighters did what they could, their attacks were mere pinpricks, unable to influence the issue to the slightest degree. On the ground the Axis troops fought desperately, attempting one large counter-attack, which held up the Allies at one point briefly, but resulted in the destruction of most of the remaining German tanks.

On May 6th the British 1st Army launched a drive on Tunis, entering the city next day, only minutes before American troops moved into Bizerta. Remaining units of Axis troops were split up, surrendering in droves as Allied air power prevented any possibility of evacuation to Europe. JG 77 flew out on the 8th having suffered heavy losses during the last days of fighting both in the air and on the ground, while the last few MC202s followed them a day or two later. From Sicily the fighters continued to fly over Cap Bon, doing what they could, but on the 13th the last Axis troops in Africa surrendered.

During the six months since the 'Torch' landings the Luftwaffe had achieved many successes, but had suffered ultimately overwhelming defeat. The first four months had offered the fighter units an almost unrivalled opportunity to build up great totals of victories, and since January 1st the most successful pilot had been Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert of II/JG 77, who had been credited with 51 victories. Heinz Bär of I/JG 77 had gained an even higher total of 59, but 22 of these had been achieved in November and December 1942. The Geschwader Kommodore, Müncheberg, had claimed 23, 13 since January 1st, but had been killed in combat with American Spitfires on March 23rd.

In the north, each unit had produced at least one 'Experte', Kurt Bühligen of II/JG 2 claiming 40, while Erich Rudorffer of the same unit claimed 27. JG 53's top-scorer was Wolfgang Tonne of I Gruppe, who was credited with 21 before being killed in an accident late in the campaign, and Anton Hafner of II/JG 51 had claimed 20 before being wounded in action during January; eight more pilots had scores running into double figures.

On the other hand, apart from the great increase in fighter losses during April and May, the loss of transport aircraft had been nothing short of catastrophic, and the bombers had also suffered greatly, the steady toll taken by the British night-fighters over Bone and the surrounding area having seriously weakened both the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica bomber forces.

The Invasions of Sicily and Italy

Even as the campaign in Tunisia was at its height, the heavy bombers of the USAAF had frequently flown north across the Mediterranean to attack ports, airfields and other targets in Sicily and Southern Italy, and also targets on the islands of Sardinia and Pantelleria. To face these attacks II/JG 27 and III/JG 53 in Sicily together with several units of the Regia Aeronautica both in Sicily and Sardinia, had been in operations for some time. Indeed the first serious series of attacks had been carried out in March, just at a time when the Italians were beginning the issue of new fighters to a number of their units. Initially, MC202s and Re2001s operating from Sardinia and Sicily were engaged frequently in intercepting these attacks, but gradually these were joined by other types. 1° Stormo had received the first MC205 Veltro in February, an improved version of the MC202 with a more powerful engine and a much-improved armament. This was slowly followed by a further nine of these fighters, and operations were begun by them during April. Around the same time a number of ex-French Dewoitine 520s were pressed into operational service, some joining 2° Stormo in Sicily. Early in March about ten more of these fighters were issued to 22° Gruppo, which was drastically short of MC202s, and later in the same month this unit took on hand the first Re2005 Sagittario, an aircraft bearing the same relationship to the Re2001 as the MC205 did to the MC202.

In April, 51° Stormo took on hand the first Fiat G55 Centauro, a fighter similarly powered and armed to the two other new types, while to remedy the shortage of home-produced fighters the Germans made available a quantity of Bf109Gs, 150° Gruppo beginning conversion to

these late in April on its return from Africa, while 3° Gruppo followed suit early in May. 150° Gruppo began operations against bomber formations with the German aircraft shortly after the fall of Tunisia, but by the end of June these, the D520s, and a handful of MC205s were the only new fighters with the Italian units which had seen any worthwhile operational use.

As mentioned above, most Allied bombers had already begun to attack targets outside Africa regularly before the final fighting in Tunisia came to an end, but after the surrender there, they redoubled their efforts, making many heavy attacks on Sardinia, Pantelleria, Sicily and Southern Italy, bombers of all types taking part, accompanied now by strong fighter escorts. On May 19th Bf109s intercepting raiders over Sardinia were badly mauled by American P-40s, while next day a formation of seven Me323s flying supplies to this island, arrived just as a raid by B-26s was underway, and all were shot down by more P-40s. A toll of the raiders was being taken however, and on the 21st II/JG 27 was able to claim three B-17 over Pantelleria, four more being claimed on the 25th.

In early June the Allies launched a concerted attack on the island fortress of Pantelleria prior to invading it, and between the 7th and the 10th defending Bf109s and MC202s from Sicily suffered heavy losses to US P-40s. Next day, the 11th, having suffered an incredible weight of bombardment from air and sea, the defenders surrendered almost at once when invading infantry went ashore. On the 12th nearby Lampedusa, which was by then also coming under attack, surrendered before any invasion was attempted.

During the month also, American B-24s from Libya extended their attacks to include airfields in Greece, as well as in Sicily and Italy. On the 26th a number of attacks were launched by Axis bombers from Sicily and Sardinia on a convoy sailing through the Mediterranean from Gibraltar, but defending fighters were encountered, three German and two Italian bombers being lost.

By early July the Allies were ready to launch an invasion of Sicily, and the assault on airfields on this island was stepped up, 100 B-17s appearing over Gerbini on the 5th and destroyed many aircraft on the ground. Desperate attempts at interception were made, but only two bombers were shot down, together with a few of the escorting fighters. 4° Stormo was much involved, but lost two of its leading pilots, Sottoten Leonardo Ferrulli being seen to shoot down two aircraft to bring his

score to 22, before he was himself shot down, while Capt Franco Lucchini got one, making his score 26, but then fell victim to the gunners of a B-17.

Every possible effort was being made to reinforce the units in Sicily before the invasion began, and the Italians now rushed down a more substantial number of Macchi MC205s (around 50); these aircraft were distributed to 3° and 4° Stormi, 51° Gruppo, and to 310ª Squadriglia Aerofotografica, to supplement these units' MC202s. They flew their first major mission on June 8th, when 15 of them escorted SM79 torpedo-bombers to attack Allied naval forces off Pantelleria.

Another new aircraft, the Reggiane Re2002 Ariete II fighter-bomber, had also just come into service with 5° Stormo Assalto, and on July 9th this unit was gathering at Crotone for anti-shipping operations. 50° Stormo Assalto was still awaiting re-equipment with these aircraft, and was temporarily flying G50bis's as interim equipment. In addition to these units receiving new aircraft, there were also in Sicily 21°, 22° and 153° Gruppi with MC202s and a few Re2005s and D520s, together with 3° and 150° Gruppi with Bf109Gs, while at Reggio Calabria, just across the Strait of Messina on the 'toe' of Italy, was 161° Gruppo with MC200s and 202s.

The Luftwaffe was also being strengthened; in the Aegean III/JG 27 was now once more re-equipping, while in Greece a new Gruppe, IV/JG 27, had been formed, and on July 9th made its first claim when it shot down an American B-24. From France II and IV/SKG 10 were being moved to Sicily, flying Fw190A4/U8 fighter-bombers, capable of carrying a 1,650lb bomb load. IV/JG 3 was also to be despatched to the south, though the Hs129 anti-tank aircraft of 8(Pz)/SG 2, left Sicily for the Russian front. Further elements of ZG 1 also arrived, equipped with Bf110s.

Operation 'Husky', the Allied invasion of Sicily, began before dawn on July 10th, 1943, and at once made rapid progress. An enormous air 'umbrella' was provided, American and British fighters patrolling overhead in droves, while fighter-bombers pounded targets ashore in support of the ground forces. Axis aircraft were thrown in to do what they could, and particularly to attack the mass of shipping lying off the southern coast. On this first day 5° Stormo Assalto entered action with its new Re2002s, sinking the transport *Talambra* in Augusta harbour, but losing four of the Ariete IIs to British Spitfires, the commanding officer, Col Nobili, being one of the pilots lost.

Next day Ju88s were thrown in in daylight, but suffered appalling losses without achieving any notable results, while on the 12th, a true sign of desperation, Italian Ju87s and G50bis's of 50° Stormo Assalto appeared over the battle area, both types suffering crippling losses. The following day the Ju87s and G50bis's returned, joined by Bf110s of III/ZG 26, every possible Bf109, MC202, MC205 and Fw190 being put into the air to try and protect them. Again the Allied fighters were everywhere, and all the assault units suffered grievous losses, the fighter escorts also being badly knocked about. The only success was gained by the Re2002s of 5° Stormo, 11 of which attacked the battleship HMS *Nelson*, getting one direct hit with a 551lb bomb.

The combined results of the heavy combat losses suffered during the first four days of the assault, and the continual losses inflicted by bombers attacking the airfields, caused a great reduction in the number of aircraft that could be put up over the front, and on the 14th only fighters appeared, attempting to disrupt the steady flow of Allied close-support aircraft, a task in which they failed completely. By this time most of the airfields in the south of the island had already fallen into Allied hands, and the shattered remains of many units began falling back into Italy.

Unable to risk appearing by day, the Ju88s, He111s and Z1007bis's now came over by night, but time and again in clear, bright moonlight, they discovered not only Beaufighters, but also the latest Mosquito night-fighters waiting for them, suffering as a result losses very nearly as severe as those they had experienced by day.

As the fighting moved to the north-east of the island, where the supply and escape route to Italy lay, and where the remaining German forces were putting up their toughest resistance, one of III/JG 27's Staffeln, 8/JG 27, which had flown to Brindisi in Southern Italy from the Aegean to lend a hand, was able to join in the fighting. The unit was led by Oblt Wolf Ettel, a notable fighter pilot with 124 victories, who had just joined the unit from Russia. During the Staffel's first sortie on July 15th, Ettel was able to shoot down a Spitfire over Mount Etna, and next day in combat against a formation of 48 American heavy bombers and their escort, the unit claimed three more victories. On the 17th however, while strafing British positions near Catania, Ettel was shot down and killed, and shortly after this loss, the Staffel returned to Greece.

5° Stormo Assalto attempted another raid on shipping in Augusta

Bay on the 19th, 15 Re2002s taking part on this occasion, but once more British Spitfires were to hand, and six were shot down. The Fw190s of the SKG 10 Gruppen had also suffered crippling losses during attempted anti-shipping strikes, and on the 20th and 21st American P-40s absolutely slaughtered most of the remaining MC202s in a series of hectic dogfights.

By now the supply position of the remaining German troops in the Messina and Mount Etna area was becoming critical, and the Luftwaffe was forced once more to attempt air supply, the long-suffering Ju52/3ms landing at rough strips close to the front by day and night. On the 25th a large formation of these, escorted by Bf109s of JG 77, was just landing in the Milazzo area when it was attacked by a full wing of Spitfires, and nearly all the transports were destroyed, losses running well into double figures. The escort, hopelessly outnumbered, put up a brave fight, but several of the Messerschmitts were shot down, including that flown by Oblt Heinz-Edgar Berres, who had been credited with 53 victories, having gained 26 of them in North Africa. Two days later the Germans lost another of their invaluable 'Experten' when Oblt Fritz Dinger of II/JG 53, victor of 67 combats, was killed on the ground in Southern Italy by bomb fragments during an Allied raid. The month came to an end with another big combat between Bf109s and US P-40s, the former again coming off worst, with considerable losses.

Ju88s of KG 26 and Do217s of KG 100, 25 bombers in all, both from bases in Southern France, raided Palermo on the north-west coast of Sicily on August 1st, putting the port out of action. Not expecting an attack from this direction, the defending American fighters were taken by surprise, and the bombers were able to escape with only relatively light losses.

On this same date however, 179 American B-24s from the US 9th Air Force, reinforced by units of the 8th Air Force from England, launched the first raid on the Rumanian oil refineries at Ploesti. While the actual attack was made on an area beyond the Mediterranean, much of the combat took place in the latter area. Over the target the 165 bombers which arrived to make the attack were intercepted by Bf109s of I/JG 4 and night-fighter Bf110s, while Avia B-534 fighter-biplanes and Bf109s of the Bulgarian Air Force attacked the bombers as they made their way to and from the target. They were also intercepted by the Bf109s of IV/JG 27 from Kalamaki, Greece, which

claimed five of them shot down; total losses during the raid were:— 33 to flak, ten to fighters, eight force-landed in Turkey, and 58 damaged.

Axis forces were now in full retreat from Sicily, and were being ferried across the Strait of Messina in every vessel that could be found. Allied fighter-bombers and light bombers attacked continually, but the heavy concentration of flak defences helped to hold them off, while whenever possible fighters took a hand. On the 12th Bf109s and Fw190s were able to 'bounce' US P-40s as the latter were attacking 'F' Boats off the 'toe' of Italy, but the Americans turned the tables, shooting down several German fighters for the loss of only one Warhawk.

Two days later on August 14th the last fighting ended, and Sicily was left in Allied hands. Hundreds of aircraft were left behind on the Sicilian airfields, either damaged or destroyed by bombing and strafing attack, or unserviceable; with those that had been shot down in combat by day and night, total Axis losses in Sicily were well in excess of 1,000 aircraft. Italian losses in the air during this period over Sardinia, Pantelleria, Sicily and Southern Italy totalled 136, 81 of them fighters.

Losses of aircraft and crews, and of bases had led to a reduction in the number of Luftwaffe units remaining in Italy, Gruppen returning to Germany or France during late July and early August including II/JG 27, I/SG 2, II and III/ZG 1 and III/ZG 26, though a considerable number of new bomber Gruppen had arrived in Italy, and others were within range of the front line targets, in Southern France. By late August Luftflotte 2 had in Italy, Sardinia and Southern France the following units:—

4(H)/12	Messerschmitt Bf109	Sardinia
2(H)/14	Messerschmitt Bf109	Italy
3(F)/33	Junkers Ju88	Italy & Sardinia
2(F)/122	Junkers Ju88 & Messerschmitt Me410	Italy & Sardinia
1(F)/123	Junkers Ju88	Italy & Sardinia
IV/JG 3	Messerschmitt Bf109	Italy
Stab, I, II & III/JG 53	Messerschmitt Bf109	Italy
Stab, I & II/JG 77	Messerschmitt Bf109	Italy
III/JG 77	Messerschmitt Bf109	Sardinia
II & III/SKG 10	Focke Wulf Fw190	Italy
II/SG 2	Focke Wulf Fw190	Sardinia
II/LG 1	Junkers Ju88	Italy
I & II/KG 1	Junkers Ju88	Italy
I/KG 26	Heinkel He111	Southern France

III/KG 26	Junkers Ju88	Southern France
Stab, I & III/KG 30	Junkers Ju88	Italy
III/KG 54	Junkers Ju88	Italy
Stab, I & II/KG 76	Junkers Ju88	Italy
II/KG 77	Junkers Ju88	Italy
III/KG 100	Dornier Do217	Southern France
2/BFGr 196	Arado Ar196	Italy
III/TG 1	Junkers Ju52/3m	Italy
II & III/TG 2	Junkers Ju52/3m	Italy
IV/TG 3	Junkers Ju52/3m	Italy
Savoy Staffel	Savoia SM82	Italy
See Transport Staffel 2	Junkers Ju52/3mW	Italy
Ju 90 Staffel	Junkers Ju90	Italy

This represented a strength of 223 fighters, 72 fighter-bombers, 311 bombers, 144 transports and 58 reconnaissance aircraft. Additionally, II/JG 51 was resting and re-equipping, while in the Balkans and Aegean were III and IV/JG 27, together with Gruppen of StG 3, LG 1 and KG 77, and Ar196 Staffeln 2/SAGr 125 and 2/SAGr 128. Also available were Tgr 30 and Kgr,zb 25, both with transport He 111s, 1(F)/33 and 1(F)/122, with Ju88s.

No sooner had the Allies secured their position on Sicily than they moved on again, and on September 3rd the first units of the 8th Army landed on the 'toe' of Italy in Calabria. Next day virtually every remaining MC202 in the area was thrown into the attack, heavy losses being suffered to British Spitfires. While these operations were under way, a second, large-scale invasion was being prepared to go ashore in the Salerno area on the west coast of Italy, just to the south of the major port of Naples. The area chosen was the furthest point north of Sicily that could be covered by fighters flying from that island.

The invasion was planned to begin on September 9th, but even as the ships were at sea, heading for the beaches, the Italian government, having deposed Benito Mussolini, announced its country's unconditional surrender. German forces acted with speed once more, disarming the Italian army and taking over the defences, and when the Allies began coming ashore at Salerno it was to a very hot reception. Fw190s of SKG 10 attacked troops as they landed on the beaches, while Do217s of III/KG 100 from Southern France, carrying new Fritz X glider-bombs, struck at the shipping off the coast. Their initial attack was made by day, falling foul of defending fighters and suffering

heavy losses. They did score one big success however, for the Italian fleet was ordered by the Allies to sail at once to Malta, to prevent it falling into German hands. As it made for the island Do217s and Ju88s appeared overhead and attacked fiercely, one glider bomb striking the battleship *Roma* amidships, whereupon she broke in half, folded up and sank, the *Italia* also being hit, but not sinking. The Do217s returned later to attack Allied shipping off Salerno by night, and on the 16th badly damaged the British battleship *Warspite* with a near miss.

By day the Allies were soon able to put too strong a fighter umbrella over the invasion area to allow any effective Luftwaffe attack to be made, and before long they had fighters and fighter-bombers operating from forward strips within their beachhead. At the same time 8th Army troops advancing from the south were beginning to threaten the airfields in this area, causing their evacuation. Indeed, before September was out these forces had captured the major complex of airfields at Foggia on the east coast, and units were soon operating from here. Luftwaffe bombers were again thrown in by night, but once more suffered heavy losses to patrolling night fighters.

At the time of the Italian surrender the Regia Aeronautica was still in numbers a sizeable force, though of late its operations had been strictly limited. Apart from the fighting over Sicily, other fighter units had been in action against American bombers and their escorts attacking targets in Southern Italy. 3° Stormo CT, using both MC202s and 205s, was much involved in these actions and gained a number of successes; Franco Bordoni-Bisleri, recovered from his injuries in Africa, was back in action with 18° Gruppo of this Stormo, and during July, August and early September he claimed seven more victories to become, with 19 victories, the surviving Italian top-scorer of World War II. During 1942 a number of night-fighter units had been formed with 1ª Squadra in Northern Italy to combat raids on the industrial areas here by British Bomber Command heavy bombers, operating by night from England. 2°, 59° and 60° Gruppi CN (later Gruppi intercettori) operated initially CR42s and Caproni Vizziola F5 fighters, later adding to these small numbers of Re2001s, Bf110s and Do217Js, but no great successes had been achieved, due mainly to the lack of an adequate radar control system. Later these units operated by day, joining the MC202 units in combatting the American bombers from the south.

On the date of the Armistice the final dispositions of the Regia Aeronautica were as follows:—

1ª Squadra Aerea (Northern Italy)

Unit	*Aircraft*	*On strength*	*Serviceable*	*Base*
50° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	5	0	Cameri
99° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM84	18	6	Lonate Pozzolo
30° Gruppo Combatt	Caproni Ca314	21	7	Bresso
53° Stormo CT	Fiat G55	1	1	Caselle
3° Gruppo CT	—	—	—	Caselle
8° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC 200	18	17	Sarzana
150° Gruppo CT	—	—	—	Caselle
2° Gruppo intercett	Reggiane Re 2001	6	3	Genoa
	Fiat CR42	12	11	Sarzana
59° Gruppo intercett	Reggiane Re2001	11	4	Vengono
	Fiat CR42	3	2	Vengono
60° Gruppo intercett	Reggiane Re2001	8	7	Lonate Pozzolo
	Messerschmitt Bf110	2	2	Lonate Pozzolo
	Dornier Do217J	8	2	Lonate Pozzolo
50° Stormo Assalto	Reggiane Re2002	10	4	Lonate Pozzolo
	Fiat G50bis	19	8	Lonate Pozzolo
19° Stormo OA	Caproni Ca313	37	29	Lonate Pozzolo
	Fiat BR20	14	7	Lonate Pozzolo
Total		193	110	

2ª Squadra Aerea (Northern–Central Italy)

8° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	6	0	Bologna
10° Stormo BT	—	—	—	Jesi
35° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	7	1	Vicenza
47° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	7	0	Bologna
1° Stormo CT	—	—	—	Ronchi
Total		20	1	

3ª Squadra Aerea (Central Italy)

9° Stormo BT	Junkers Ju88	10	10	Viterbo
274ª Squadriglia BGR	Piaggio P108B	3	2	Foligno
Raggruppamento Bomb	Cant Z1007bis	22	9	Perugia
Raggruppamento Sil	Savoia SM79sil	39	22	Siena-Pisa
104° Gruppo Sil	Savoia SM79sil	12	8	Siena
132° Gruppo Sil	Savoia SM79sil	9	6	Littoria
Sezione autonomo Sil	Savoia SM79sil	1	0	Capodichino
172ª Squadriglia RS	—	—	—	Viterbo

Unit	*Aircraft*	*On strength*	*Serviceable*	*Base*
3° Stormo CT	Macchi MC202	35	17	Cerveteri
	Macchi MC205	12	4	Cerveteri
20° Gruppo CT	—	—	—	Foligno
22° Gruppo CT	Reggiane Re2001	4	0	Capodichino
	Reggiane Re2005	7	0	Capodichino
	Macchi MC202	20	9	Capodichino
24° Gruppo CT	Dewoitine D520	13	6	Metato
	Macchi MC202	3	2	Metato
161° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC202	1	0	Castiglione
	SAI 207	2	0	Castiglione
353ª Squadriglia CT	Fiat G55	12	2	Ciampino
167° Gruppo intercett	Reggiane Re2001	14	7	Littoria
Nucleous 51° Stormo CT	Macchi MC202	6	3	
	Macchi MC205	4	3	
Nucleus 150° Gruppo CT	Messerschmitt Bf109 G	4	2	
310ª Squadriglia Aerofot	Macchi MC205	6	3	Guidonia
15° Stormo Assalto	Fiat CR42	28	6	Firenza
20° Stormo OA	Caproni Ca314	53	32	
Total		320	153	

4ª Squadra Aerea (Southern Italy)

98° Gruppo BT	Savoia SM84	12	9	Gioia
Sez 8° Stormo BT	Cant Z1007bis	2	1	Brindisi
4° Stormo CT	Macchi MC205	30	17	Castrovillari
21° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC202	25	6	Gioia
157° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	12	7	Grottaglie
Sez 8° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC200	4	1	
5° Stormo Assalto	Reggiane Re2002	24	12	Manduria
Total		109	53	

Aeronautica Sardegna (Sardinia)

264ª Squadriglia BT	Cant Z1007bis	4	3	Alghero
121° Gruppo BaT	Junkers Ju87	12	7	Chilivari
51° Stormo CT	Macchi MC202	14	4	Monserrato
	Macchi MC205	14	8	Monserrato
13° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC202	10	6	Venafiorita
160° Gruppo CT	Reggiane Re2001	30	12	Venafiorita
Sez 160° Gruppo CT	Fiat CR42	2	2	Ajaccio, Corsica
	Fiat G50bis	1	1	Ajaccio, Corsica
Total		87	43	

Unit	*Aircraft*	*On strength*	*Serviceable*	*Base*
Aviazione Slovenia—Dalmazia (Yugoslavia)				
51ª Squadriglia BT	Fiat BR20	8	8	Zara
69ª Squadriglia BT	Fiat BR20	6	5	Santori
383ª Squadriglia Assalto	Fiat CR42	22	13	Zara
21° Stormo OA	Fiat BR20	11	8	
	Caproni Ca311	5	2	
	Caproni Ca134	41	29	
Total		93	65	
Aeronautica Albania				
38° Stormo BT	Fiat BR20	31	23	Tirana
43° Gruppo Combattimento	Caproni Ca314	18	17	Devoli
376ª Squadriglia CT	Macchi MC200	2	2	Tirana
	Fiat G50bis	7	3	Tirana
392ª Squadriglia CT	Fiat CR42	11	9	Tirana
	Fiat G50bis	5	2	Tirana
Six squadriglie OA	Caproni Ca311	17	11	
	Caproni Ca313	10	2	
	Caproni Ca314	21	13	
Total		122	82	
Aeronautica Grecia (Greece)				
385ª Squadriglia CT	Macchi MC200	16	6	Araxos
	Fiat G50bis	3	0	Araxos
Sez Intercett	Fiat CR42	4	3	Tatoi
Two squadriglie OA	Caproni Ca311	9	4	
	Caproni Ca313	1	1	
	Fiat BR20	11	8	
Total		44	22	
Aeronautica Egeo (Aegean)				
87° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	6	0	Kalamaki
90° Gruppo BT	Cant Z1007bis	13	8	Rhodes
150° Gruppo CT	Macchi MC202	8	6	Rhodes
	Fiat G50bis	13	5	Rhodes
	Fiat CR42	19	11	Rhodes
Sez Intercettori	Fiat CR42	5	3	Rhodes
Total		64	33	

Throughout the whole area were the flyingboats and floatplanes in Gruppi and squadriglie, totalling 53 Fiat RS14s, 84 Cant Z501s and 58 Cant Z506Bs, of which 94 were serviceable, to give a total strength of 1,233 aircraft, together with the transport units, and the 58 Ro43s,

Ro44s, Reggiane Re2000s and Fiat CR42s of the navy's catapult units. A substantial proportion of these aircraft reached Allied hands after the surrender, serving later with the air force of the Co-Belligerent Italian Forces, while the rest remained in the hands of the Germans and the new Fascist Republica Sociale Italiana, which was set up in Northern Italy after the surrender, to continue the struggle alongside the Germans.

The Germans meanwhile had been finding Sardinia difficult to maintain as a base for operations. Allied command of the sea and air made supplying the units there by sea a hazardous business in the extreme, while air supply had led to frequent interceptions and regular losses, particularly during July; it also put a further strain on the already inadequate resources at hand. In mid September therefore it was decided to evacuate the island, and while the units of the Luftwaffe there flew out to the Rome area, the ground personnel, garrison troops and stores were evacuated by sea and air.

Shortly after the Salerno landings, French forces from North Africa invaded Corsica, and at once flew in a unit of Spitfires of the Armée de l'Air to defend the main port of Ajaccio on the southern end of the island. On September 24th a small force of Do217s and Ju88s from Southern France raided the port with glider-bombs, but the defending fighters shot down half of the attacking formation. The German troops on the island were being pushed into the northern extremity meanwhile and late in the month it was decided that they should be evacuated by air. The resultant flow of transport aircraft was noted by the Allies and was subjected to interceptions during the final two days, nearly 30 transports being shot down. Despite this, some 25,000 personnel and 60 tons of supplies were successfully evacuated to Italy, and escorting Bf109s were able to shoot down several of the attacking Beaufighters. By the end of September II/JG 53 had left Italy for Southern Germany, and KG 77 had been disbanded. During the Salerno crisis more Fw190A fighter-bombers appeared in Italy with the arrival of I/SG 4 from Germany.

Although able to do little to affect the course of events over Italy, the Luftwaffe was offered the opportunity to play a more decisive role in the Aegean during September. On the 9th, the day of the Salerno landings, a small British force occupied the little island of Castelrosso, British bombers then making a number of heavy raids on airfields on Rhodes. On the 13th landings were made on the island of Kos, to the

north of Crete and Rhodes, and just off the coast of Turkey; a small air base was set up here, the nearby islands of Leros and Samsos also being occupied over the next few days.

This move constituted a considerable threat to the German presence in the Aegean, and therefore on the 17th a concentrated attack on Kos was launched by aircraft from Greece, bombers escorted by Bf109s of IV/JG 27 attacking the island for several days. The British put up a hard fight in the air, and while the Messerschmitts were able to shoot down several of the defending Spitfires, the bombers suffered a number of losses. Since the Luftwaffe had a good opportunity to regain air superiority in this area, and to have a decisive effect on the position generally, something more than 100 aircraft were rushed to the area from Italy, to bring strength there to 350, including 90 Ju88s and He111s, 65 Ju87s and 50 Bf109s.

Allied bombers now launched a number of raids on airfields in Greece, Crete and Rhodes, but late in the month the Luftwaffe returned to the attack in greater strength, III/JG 27 this time operating from Crete over Kos, while IV/JG 27 defended the Greek airfields against American daylight bombers. Quickly the remaining British fighters were destroyed, and on October 3rd German forces invaded Kos, closely supported by Ju87s of StG 3. The only Allied air cover that could now be given was by Beaufighters from Cyprus, and these quickly fell foul of the Messerschmitts, although they did manage to shoot down several Ju87s; losses to the British fighters were heavy however. The island swiftly fell, and on the 12th Leros followed, Samsos also being taken somewhat later.

During these weeks Beaufighters and American P-38s and B-25s appeared over the Aegean in strength, and some hard combats were fought, III/JG 27 gaining some considerable successes. On October 18th 12 Ju88s raided the island of Castelrosso, but this was in range of Cyprus-based fighters, and three of the bombers failed to return. At this time Stukageschwader 3 was retitled Schlachtgeschwader 3.

Reorganisation and Retreat

With Foggia in Allied hands, American B-17s and B-24s, and British Wellingtons quickly moved in here as this base was within range of targets throughout Southern Europe. From this point, they were to join bomber units in Great Britain in attacking targets all over 'Fortress Europe', and were to contribute only a small part of their sorties to attacks on targets in Italy or the Balkans. The first such raid was made on Wiener/Neustadt in Southern Germany on October 1st, and more soon followed on Germany, Hungary, Rumania and Czechoslovakia. The growing power of the Allied strategic bombing forces in the Mediterranean would now cause more and more units of fighters to have to be moved northwards, away from the front, to defend the industrial heartlands of Europe.

During October Oberst Baron Günther von Maltzahn, Geschwader Kommodore of JG 53, was appointed 'Jafu Italien', in charge of all fighter units in Italy. At the same time the first units of the new air force of the Republic Sociale Italiana (RSI) began forming, the first being a Gruppo Autonoma Aerosiluranti, with SM79/II and III torpedo-bombers, and a Gruppo Autonomo de BT with Z1007bis bombers. The following month 1° Gruppo CT with MC205s, 1° and 2° Gruppi Aerotrasporti with SM81s and SM82s, and a Squadriglia Caccia Complimentare with Fiat G55s were set up, together with a training organisation.

During October 1943 P-38s were frequently met by German fighters, particularly over the Aegean. On the 9th four of these aircraft attacked a formation of Ju87s of SG 3, escorted by Ju88s, which were attempting to attack an Allied convoy, and 12 of the Stukas were lost. Against the

Bf109s the P-38s continued to be at a disadvantage however, both III and IV/JG 27 fighting several successful combats with these aircraft during the month, the latter unit particularly achieving considerable success, claiming five on the 25th and three on the 31st, while on November 15th it was to claim no less than 13 over Greece, four more together with three B-25s following two days later. On another occasion over Italy, Major Johannes Steinhoff, Kommodore of JG 77, 'bounced' a formation of P-38s single-handed, and shot down six in rapid succession.

While the units in Italy could do little at this stage, those in Southern France were able to operate more freely, and during November made several strong attacks on Allied supply and reinforcement convoys crossing the Western Mediterranean. On the 6th eight Do217s of KG 100 with glider-bombs, together with 17 torpedo-carrying He111s and Ju88s of KG 26, attacked a convoy of 25 troopships without being intercepted. However, on the 26th 21 Heinkel He177s of II/KG 40 made their first raid over the Mediterranean to attack another convoy off the North African coast. They were intercepted by French Spitfires, American P-39s and British Beaufighters, losing six bombers, including that of the Gruppenkommandeur, but they did manage to sink the liner *Rohna* with glider-bombs, more than 1,000 American soldiers being drowned.

Another successful bombing operation was flown on the night of December 2nd–3rd by Ju88s of KG 54 and 76. The bombers, based in the Milan area, refuelled at forward airfields before bombing the port of Bari on the south-east coast of Italy. Dropping aluminium foil strips similar to British 'Window' to confuse the Allied radar, they attacked without loss. One of the first bombs to be dropped hit an ammunition ship, which blew up violently, setting three other nearby vessels on fire, and by the time the attack ended 14 ships were blazing while substantial casualties to personnel had also been inflicted.

From this area of Italy, British and Italian Co-Belligerent fighter aircraft were now flying across the Adriatic to attack Albanian targets, and these aircraft were encountered on several occasions by SG 3, IV/JG 27, and some of the transport Gruppen, all of which lost some aircraft to them. IV/JG 27 fought a number of brisk combats during December with these new intruders, but before the end of the month this Gruppe had been ordered to Germany for home defence duties.

In Northern Italy two more RSI fighter units were formed in December, 2° Gruppo CT with G55s, and 3° Gruppo with MC205Vs and MC202s. The new Italian air units had their first opportunities to engage in combats on a large scale in January 1944 when new Allied landings took place at Anzio, to the south of Rome, and American heavy bombers raided Northern Italian targets in support. An indication of the attrition suffered by the Luftwaffe at this time is well given by I/SG 4, which since its arrival in the early autumn, was now down to a strength of only one aircraft.

The Anzio landings began on January 22nd, and were a complete surprise, as Allied air power had kept all Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft away from the area until well after the first troops had actually gone ashore. Available to the Luftwaffe were still some 200 Bf109s, but the larger part of these were in the north, about 80, plus 30 Fw190s of SKG 10, being available in the Rome area for immediate operations. KG 54 and 76 had 130 Ju88s, while KG 100 at Istres in France, could quickly put 25 Do217s over the area; little else was on hand however, to face an Allied air force of several thousand aircraft. During the first few days all possible aircraft were thrown in to attack the Anzio beachhead, but sorties rarely exceeded 100 per day, and most failed to break through the defending air umbrella, heavy losses again being suffered by day and night. On the 23rd Do217s of III/KG 100 with glider-bombs attacked the massive fleets of shipping lying offshore, and sank the destroyer HMS *Janus*; six days later they achieved a more significant success, sinking the cruiser HMS *Spartan*, together with a Liberty ship. These were to be the last successes of note for the units employing glider-bombs in the Mediterranean however.

B-17s raided the Udine area on the 30th in support of the Anzio fighting, and on this occasion the defending fighters met for the first time in Italy the new American P-47 Thunderbolts. Five groups of B-17s and B-24s, closely escorted by three groups of P-38s approached the target area, while the group of P-47s came in at low level 15 minutes ahead of the bombers, arriving without warning just as the fighters were scrambling. JG 77 and 1° Gruppo CT did what they could, shooting down two of the Thunderbolts, but a substantial number of Bf109s and MC205s were lost. The P-47s also caught a formation of 15 Ju52/3ms in the air, together with other aircraft including Do217s, taking a fearful toll. Meanwhile the bombers were able to attack the airfields in the area unhindered, and 29,000 fragmen-

tation bombs were dropped, dozens more aircraft being destroyed or damaged on the ground. The Axis fighters finally managed to intercept them on the way out, shooting down six bombers and a P-38. Next day the P-47s appeared again, this time near Venice, a number of SM82s and Bf109s being lost to them on this occasion.

Although the Anzio landings had achieved such surprise and early success, they were not vigorously exploited, and the Germans were able to throw together a scratch force, and to counter-attack on February 16th, supported by 250 sorties by the Luftwaffe. Next day 200 more sorties were made, but these were a tiny fraction of the number being achieved by the Allies, and quickly the counter-attack was brought to a halt by massive air attacks.

The Luftwaffe had lost another of its 'Experten' on February 3rd when Hpt Herbert Puschmann of II/JG 51 was shot down and killed by gunners in an American medium bomber near Civitavecchia; he had claimed 54 victories, and had received the Knights' Cross. On the 14th JG 77 and 1° Gruppo CT had again suffered casualties to P-47s, this time over the Verona marshalling yards. More raids during the early part of March over Rome, Udine and Padua brought further combats, and while nine P-47s were shot down in these encounters, losses were about double this figure—a rate of attrition the Axis could ill afford.

Increasingly heavy raids on the Reich itself by bombers based in England, and also by those in the Foggia area, were leading to the recall for home defence of more and more fighter units. At the end of March III/JG 27 also returned to Germany, leaving only a small detachment of Bf109s in Crete. This unit had fought many hard battles with RAF Beaufighters and Baltimores over supply convoys plying between the various Aegean islands, a task in which it had been joined by the Ar196 Staffeln. March had seen some particularly heavy fighting for this part of the world, and on the 6th four South African Marauder bombers from a formation of six had been shot down. Soon after the main part of the Gruppe left, the first Spitfire 9s appeared over Crete as escorts for the bomber formations, and Mustangs also began to appear. The remaining fighters were quickly shot down, or destroyed on the ground, and by mid 1944 aerial resistance over the Aegean had virtually ceased, the RAF ruling the skies here.

During the Spring of 1944, following the failure of the German counter-attack at Anzio, the main fighting on the Italian front con-

centrated upon the defence of the Casino area, where the determined resistance of the paratroopers on Monastery Hill was pinning down large numbers of Allied troops, preventing them reaching the Anzio beachhead, from where an early advance on Rome could be launched. The Luftwaffe at this time could do little more than make odd surprise attacks with small formations of fighter-bombers, fly reconnaissances, and put up occasional night raids on Allied communication targets.

At this time too, Yugoslavia was proving an increasing problem as the strength, organisation and audacity of the guerilla forces there, now numbering something of the order of 250,000 men and women, was forcing the maintenance of 14 German and six Bulgarian divisions here, together with various other satellite forces, just to maintain a hold on the country. Air support was given by a motley collection of liaison and army co-operation aircraft from Luftflotte 4, such as Henschel Hs126s and Fieseler Fi156s, together with a number of elderly Italian aircraft, taken over after the surrender; a few fighters were also on hand, but numbers generally were very small. The guerillas meanwhile were receiving an ever-increasing amount of air support from the Allied air forces in Italy, and any movement on the Adriatic, or along the coastline was becoming increasingly hazardous. Again, little could be done by the Luftwaffe to challenge the Allied formations, which operated virtually at will.

The main operations during the first half of 1944 by the remaining fighter units in Italy, both German and Italian, were directed against the growing formations of US B-17s and B-24s, with their escorting P-38s, P-47s, and later, P-51s, as these pressed northwards to attack targets in South Germany, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, or to bomb industrial centres in Northern Italy itself. On April 2nd for instance, Bf109s, MC205s, and a small number of Bf110s intercepted a large formation heading for Zagreb in Yugoslavia. On the 24th III/JG 77 was involved in an interception of more bombers heading this time for Ploesti, and on this occasion Lt Emil Omert was amongst those shot down and killed. A Knights' Cross holder, he was credited with 70 victories at the time of his death, having seen much action over the Mediterranean area, as well as on the Eastern Front. Indeed, his first victory had been gained over Yugoslavia in April 1941, and he had claimed two more over Crete the following month. A few days later on the 25th G55s of 2° Gruppo CT of the RSI were engaged with bombers attacking Turin, and on this occasion lost two of their

number. On the 6th 1° Gruppo had been involved in a fight with P-47s, during which two MC205s were shot down, but in return two P-47s were claimed, one by Serg Magg Luigi Gorrini, who thus brought his score to 19, four of them since the formation of the RSI, equalling the score of Bordoni-Bisleri, the highest-scoring surviving Regia Aeronautica pilot; a few days later Gorrini was shot down and wounded, seeing no further action.

The small air component in Yugoslavia was dealt a savage blow on April 6th, when Spitfire fighter-bombers of Desert Air Force attacked Banja Luka airfield in a surprise assault, destroying a large number of aircraft including CR42s, Hs126s, Ju87s, and a variety of fighters and transport types on the ground. Without fighter protection the remaining aircraft found it steadily harder to support the ground forces in the face of the ever-growing number of Allied fighters about, and when an offensive was launched against the partisans on May 25th, necessitating at least an attempt at air support, a further number of Hs126s and Ju87s were shot down or destroyed on the ground.

In Italy the Allied Spring offensive opened on May 11th, and quickly the Gustav Line crumbled, the whole front being forced into retreat. Allied squadrons were now based on Corsica, as well as on the mainland, and from here they were able to attack deep into territory behind the lines. On the 21st RAF Spitfires from Corsica intercepted 20 Fw190 fighter-bombers of SKG 10, shooting down eight of them, while other units remaining near the front also suffered heavy losses. On June 4th Allied forces entered Rome, and the Germans then began a fighting withdrawal to the Gothic Line, a string of strong fortifications right across Italy, situated in the Northern Appenines.

Two days after the fall of Rome, Allied forces from England landed in Normandy, and quickly the situation there became critical. Fighter units from the Reich, and from the Eastern Front were thrown into the defence of the West, a defence that soon proved to be a holocaust, whole units being wiped out wholesale. By the middle of June units were being withdrawn from the already weakened Luftwaffe in Italy at an alarming rate, the Fw190s of SKG 10 and I/SG 4 the Ju88 bomber Gruppen, and most of the remaining fighter units leaving during the month. Indeed, apart from two Gruppen of JG 77 and a few reconnaissance and army co-operation units, virtually the whole of Luftflotte 2 had gone by the end of June. From this point onwards the Germans were to rely for the defence of Southern Europe from bombing attacks

mainly on the air forces of their allies. Fighter production was far outstripping the supply of trained pilots, and Bf109s of the latest type were supplied in substantial quantities to the air forces of Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and the RSI for use mainly against the Italy-based bombers of the US 15th Air Force.

2° Gruppo CT received its first Bf109Gs to supplement its G55s during June, while 1° Gruppo now began receiving quantities of G55s, which were still in production, to supplement their dwindling establishment of Macchis. The Gruppo Aerosiluranti was very active against Allied shipping in the Western Mediterranean at this stage, and during the night of June 4th–5th launched a raid with its SM79-IIIs on Gibraltar.

During the next three months it was the fighters of the Southern European nations mentioned above which were to put up a large part of the resistance to further American attacks, but while all claimed substantial victory tallies, P-51s were now accompanying the bombers in increasing numbers, and losses were high. To replace the many units of the Luftwaffe that had left Italy, Nachtschlachtgruppe 9 now began operations at night with Ju87s, attacking tactical targets at the front. Darkness did not provide as much protection as had been hoped, and 13 were shot down by Allied night-fighters during July, eight more falling to these in August, while a ninth was caught at dawn by Spitfires, and was also lost.

A few Bf109s had been despatched to Yugoslavia at this time to provide some cover to the aircraft operating with the ground forces, but not only did these fall foul of the vastly superior numbers of Spitfires over the area, but also to Mustangs which were now beginning to appear in a tactical role with the Desert Air Force; during July several Bf109s and Hs126s were lost to these enemy fighters, and air activity over Yugoslavia by the Luftwaffe once more declined.

The End of the Line

From the summer of 1944, the fortunes of the Axis powers declined at an accelerating rate, matters rapidly going from bad to worse. In August, following heavy air attacks launched from Corsica and from Southern Italy by the Allied air forces, the South of France was invaded on the 15th of that month, and the small German garrison, greatly weakened by withdrawals of units for action in Normandy, quickly collapsed.

When the new assault began there were about 150 bombers of KG 26 and 100 in the area, together with 45 fighters—mainly twin-engined 'Zerstroers'—and a few reconnaissance aircraft. Against the mighty aerial armada facing them, not only from Corsica and Italy, but also from an Anglo-American aircraft carrier task force, there was just nothing the Luftwaffe could do. In the early days of the invasion a number of aircraft were destroyed on the ground, and on the 19th a sweep by 110 Seafires and Hellcats from the carrier task force shot down five bombers when some Do217s and Ju88s were met in the air. To prevent further useless losses the remains of the Luftwaffe in Southern France were then withdrawn to Germany.

Even as this disastrous blow was struck, in the east the Red Army launched a massive new offensive. Without air cover, most units having been withdrawn to the Western Front, where they had been decimated, the German armies were unable to put up their usual dogged resistance, and harried from the air by thousands of ground-attack aircraft, swamped by vastly greater numbers of troops and tanks, they fell back in headlong retreat. This had an immediate and catastrophic effect on the position in the Mediterranean, and particularly in the Balkans. In quick succession during September, Rumania, Bulgaria, and (in the north) Finland, requested armistices, and ceased to fight, all then turning on their former ally at the behest of the Russians, to drive all remaining German forces from their soil as a term of the armistice granted.

This swift retreat in the east now threatened to cut off the forces in Greece, Albania and Southern Yugoslavia, and a rapid withdrawal got underway as the Russians poured across Hungary. Large numbers of aircraft of every type were rushed to Greece to fly out key personnel and equipment, but once more the Allied air forces were quick to seize the opportunity to attack these, Ju52/3ms being destroyed in large numbers on Greek airfields, while more of these aircraft, together with Do217s, He111s, Z1007s, Bf110s, Hs126s, transport gliders and escorting fighters all fell victim to marauding Mustangs and Spitfires throughout the first half of September over Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia.

While the forces were beginning the long journey northwards along the single route still open to them, under continual air and guerilla attack, it had become apparent that it would not be possible to evacuate the garrisons of the Aegean islands in the face of the total RAF air superiority now existing there. Consequently every flyingboat

and float-equipped Ju52/3mW now joined Ju52s, He111s and Ju290s, about 150 transports in all, to fly out as many specialists and other trained personnel as possible at night.

From Egypt a fighter-control ship sailed for the area, and for several nights this directed Beaufighter night-fighters to intercept the transports, 20 of which were lost in a few nights in late September and early October. On September 17th British forces landed in Southern Greece in the Peloponnese, and soon air units had flown in to continue harrying the withdrawing German columns.

Even as these operations were under way, a new Allied offensive was begun in Italy on September 13th, against the Gothic Line. For several weeks savage fighting raged in the mountains, and on the 21st the port of Rimini on the east coast was lost to the Poles. However, while the Allied armies broke through the line, they were too weakened by the loss of the units recently withdrawn for the invasion of Southern France, to have the wherewithall to break right through to the North Italian plain, and to press on into Hungary. Consequently the Germans were able to hold them in the final mountain ranges as the autumn rains set in and forced an end to any further offensive action on a large scale until the Spring.

Bad weather and activities elsewhere in the autumn and winter of 1944 caused a reduction in air activity over Northern Italy. US heavy bombers now no longer attacked targets in Rumania and Bulgaria, all attacks being concentrated further west. While no longer faced by the air forces of these countries, the Americans now found themselves opposed by Luftflotte 4 which had fallen back from the east into Hungary, and was responsible for the defence of both that country and of Yugoslavia, as well as by the Hungarian Air Force and that of the RSI. This latter force was now adding Bf109Ks to its inventory, these fighters entering service with both 1° and 2° Gruppi CT; the Italian units had now become virtually a part of the Luftwaffe, to which the combined fighter elements were known as Jagdgeschwader 1 (Italien). In Italy Oberst von Maltzahn had been replaced in October as Jagdführer Italien by Oberst Günther Lützow, banished to the Southern Front after quarrels with Herman Goering during the 'Mutiny of the Fighter Aces', which had also led to the relieving of Generalleutnant Adolf Galland from his post as Inspector General of the Fighters.

In December 1944 3° Gruppo CT of the RSI also began to re-equip

with Bf109Gs and Ks, but by the turn of the year the Italian units formed the bulk of the remaining air striking force, the only other Luftflotte 2 units in Italy being:—

Nachtaufklarungsgruppe 11	29 Bf109 and Fw190
2(F)/FAGr 122	4 Me410
4(F)/FAGr 122	8 Ju88 and Ju188
6(F)/FAGr 122	4 Ju188
NSGr 9	23 Ju87

As can be seen, with the exception of NSGr 9, the whole of the remaining Luftwaffe component was comprised of tactical or strategic reconnaissance units. Operating over the Balkans were such units of Luftflotte 4 as could be spared from time to time from the main battle against the Red Army. Luftflotte 4 included under its command II/JG 51, II/JG 52 and I/JG 53 with Bf109s, the whole of SG 2 and SG 10, the former with Fw190s and Ju87s, the latter entirely equipped with Fw190s, the whole of KG 4 with He111s, one Gruppe of KG 27, two Gruppen and one Staffel of transports, and for reconnaissance, NAGr 12 and 14, FAGr 2, two Staffeln of strategic reconnaissance Ju88s and Ju188s, a Croatian Staffel with Bf109s and Hs126s, and three Nachtschlachtgruppen, 5, 7 and 10 with a mixed bag of Hs126, Ju87, CR42, Go145 and Ar66 aircraft. It was aircraft of this Luftflotte which were encountered by British and American aircraft over Yugoslavia during the latter part of 1944.

With less and less targets of strategic worth to attack in Northern Italy, the US heavy bombers appeared much less frequently during the early months of 1945, concentrating their attacks on the German homeland. The Italian fighter units continued to put up what resistance they could, though increasingly their opponents were the fighters and medium bombers of the tactical air forces, which could now reach virtually every corner of Italy remaining in Axis hands.

In March a few Luftflotte 4 aircraft were again able to operate over Yugoslavia, but these were generally in very small numbers, Fw190s, Do17Zs, Ca313s and Hs126s appearing, some of these being aircraft of Croatian units, formed from Yugoslavs sympathetic to the Nazis for action in Russia, which had returned to fight Marshal Tito's Communist forces in their own country. The partisans were now formed

into full divisions and armies, with adequate Allied air support, and were launching strong offensive action against the German forces still present in Northern Yugoslavia.

In Italy during March Luftflotte 2 ceased to exist, Luftwaffe General Italien being set up instead. Establishment had changed little since January, except that 2(F)/122 had gone, and a small detachment of three Arado Ar234 jet reconnaissance-bombers, the Kommando Sommer, had taken its place, while the strength of NSGr 9 had been raised to 38 aircraft with the arrival of a number of Fw190s for night ground attack sorties.

On April 9th, 1945 the final Allied offensive in Italy opened, begun and supported by massive air bombardment which shattered the defences. Within days the Allied armies were pouring across the North Italian plain, city after city falling to them, while the tattered remnants of the German and Italian Fascist armies surrendered, or fled towards the Alps. Few Axis aircraft were able to even get into the air to oppose the vast fleets of bombers and fighters sweeping all before them, and the last engagement took place during the night of April 12th–13th, when an Fw190 of NSGr 9 was shot down by an RAF Mosquito. By the beginning of May the 8th Army columns in the east had met Yugoslav units advancing along the opposite shore of the Adriatic, and on May 2nd hostilities on the Southern Front ended with final unconditional surrender.

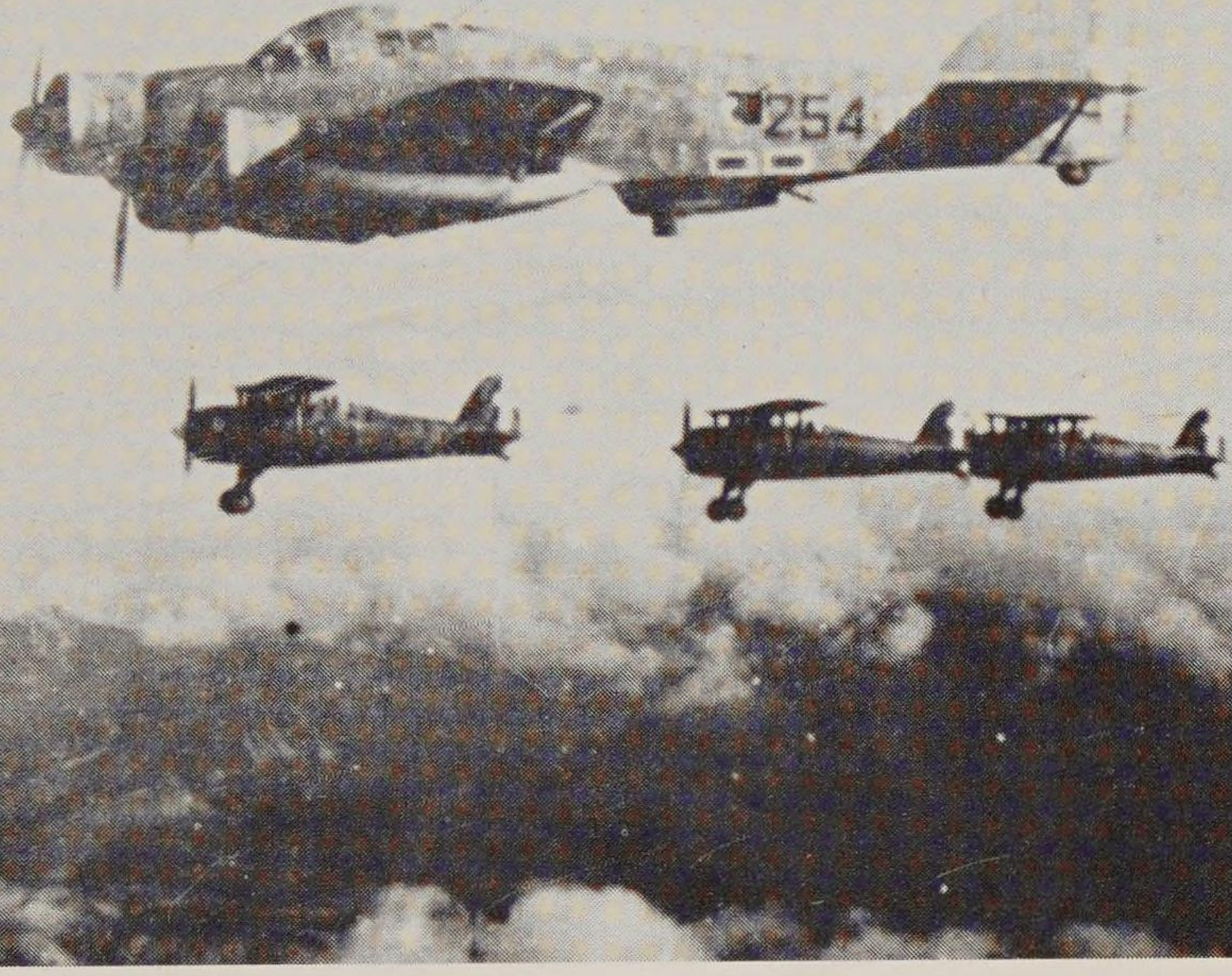
Since their formation at the end of 1943, the Italian RSI fighter units had put up a steady fight against greatly superior numbers. Claims and losses had been as follows:—

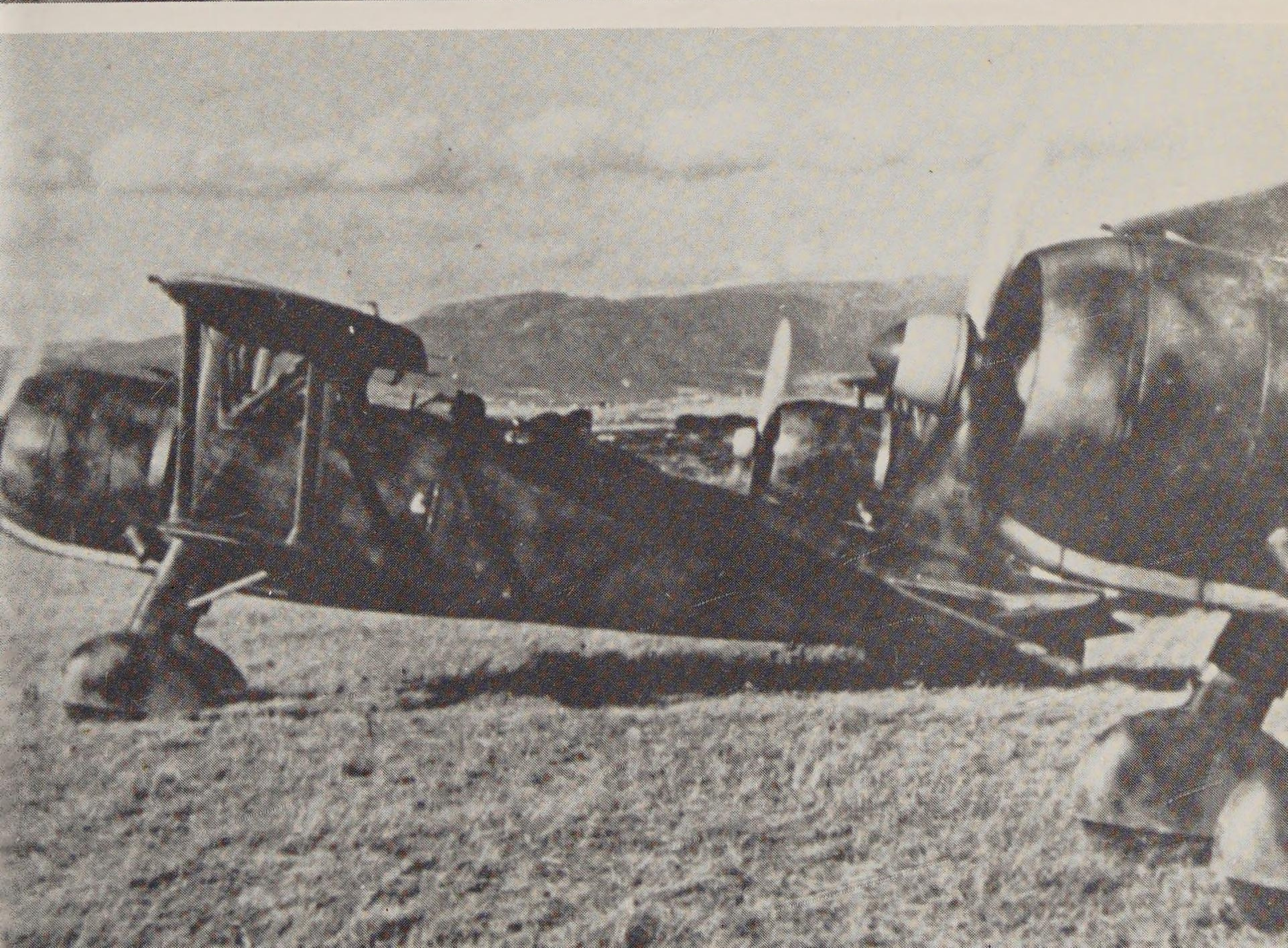
	Claims	*Losses in combat*
1° Gruppo CT	106	71
2° Gruppo CT	109	55
3° Gruppo CT	11	6
Squadriglia Caccia		
Complementare		5
Total	226	137

1° Gruppo had carried out most of its operations against the Allied Strategic Air Force, having been the first to enter action, and its most successful pilot had been Magg Adriano Visconti, who had claimed

seven victories to bring his total to 26, before he was killed by Italian partisans. 2° Gruppo, having claimed the greater part of its victories against the Allied Tactical Air Force, had produced two leading pilots, Capt Ugo Drago and Capt Mario Bellagambi, each with 11 victories.

Below: First offensive action by the Regia Aeronautica on the outbreak of war in the Mediterranean, was directed against the French. Here a Savoia SM79 trimotor bomber of 254ª Squadriglia is escorted by Fiat CR 42s of 78ª Squadriglia to attack targets in the French North African colony of Tunisia./*via G. Pini*
Bottom: Most numerous Italian fighter in June 1940 was the Fiat CR42, one of the finest biplane fighters ever built. Several of these are seen here about to take off from an airfield in Sicily, probably for a mission over Malta./*via G. Pini*

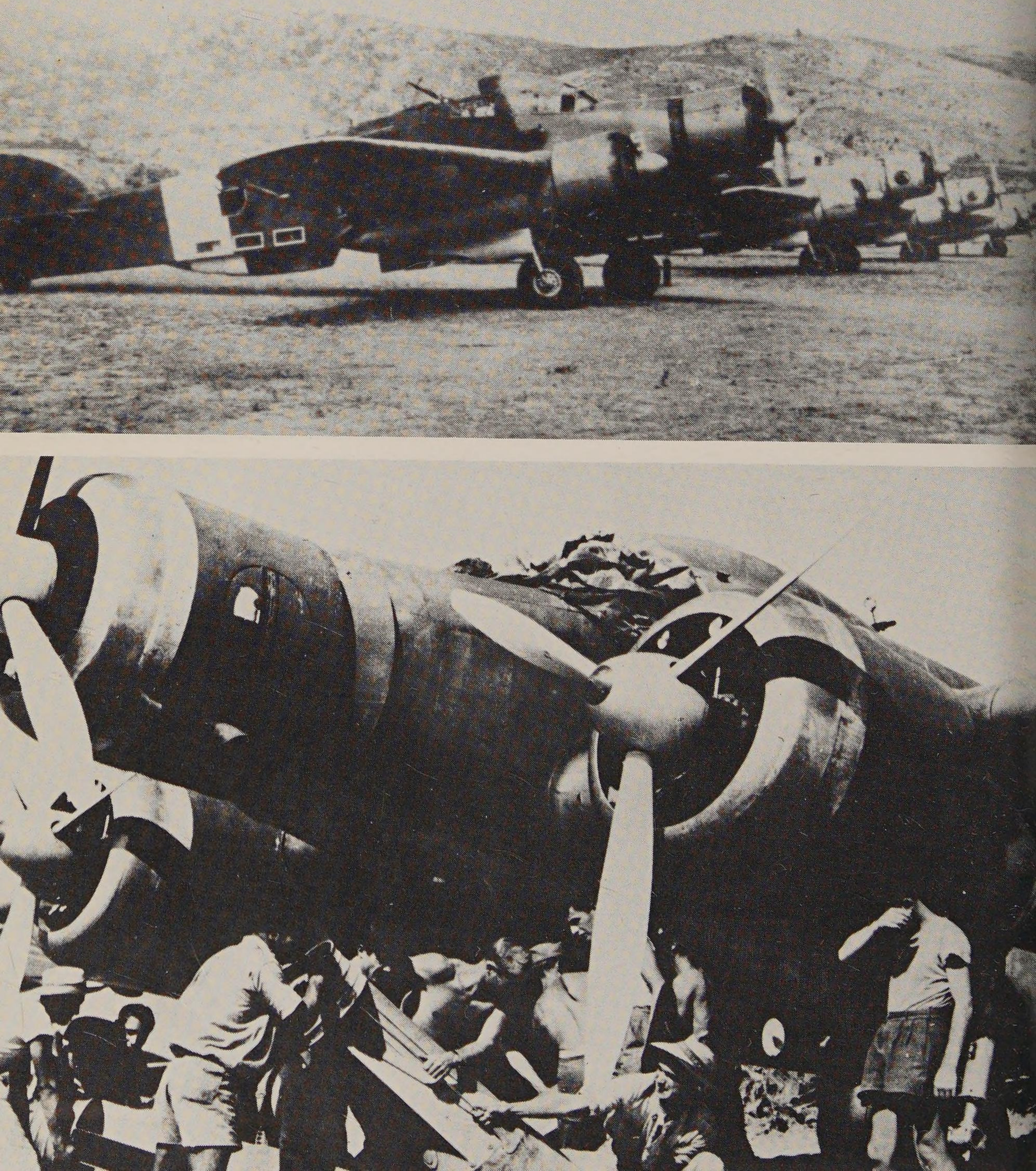


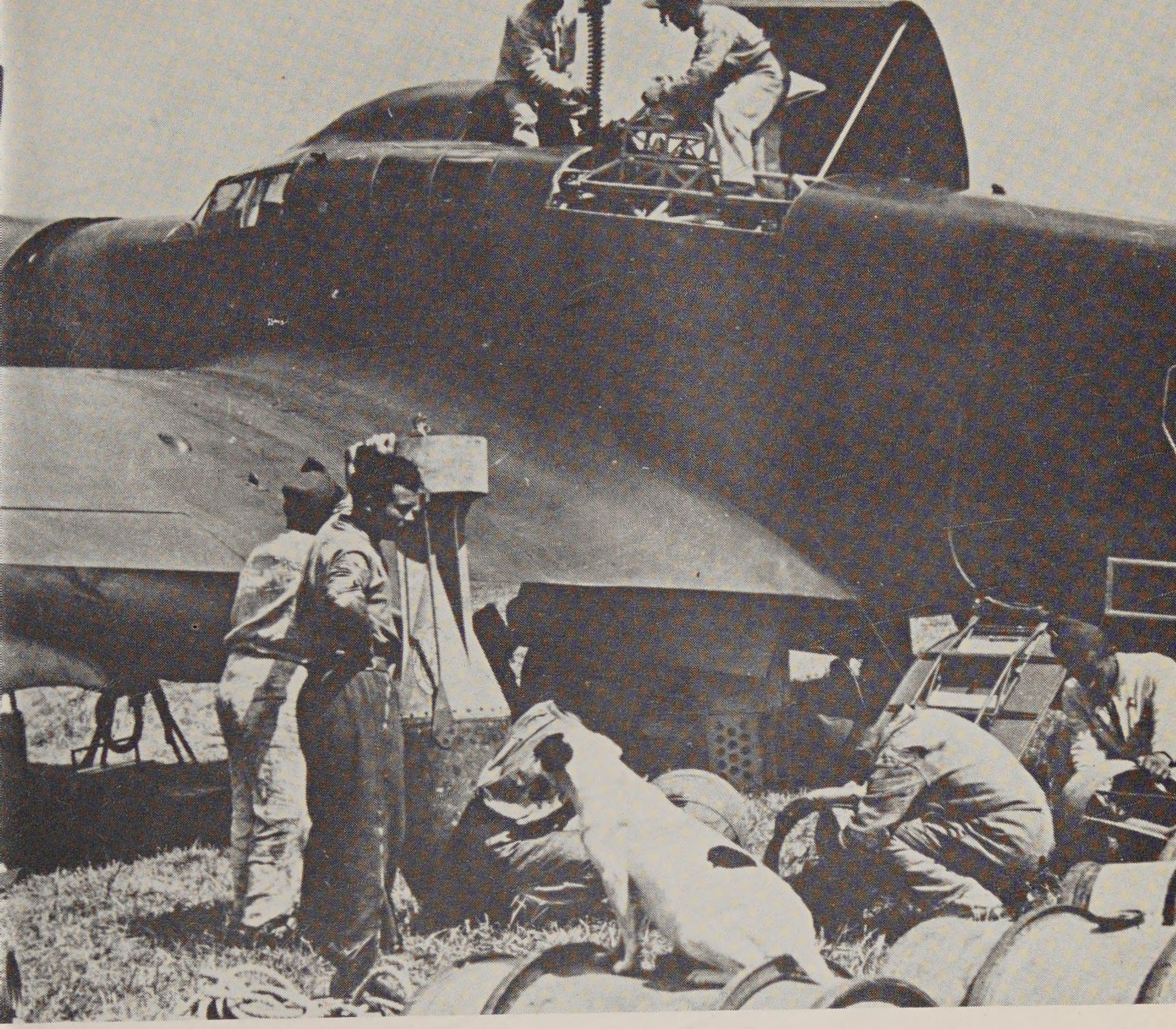


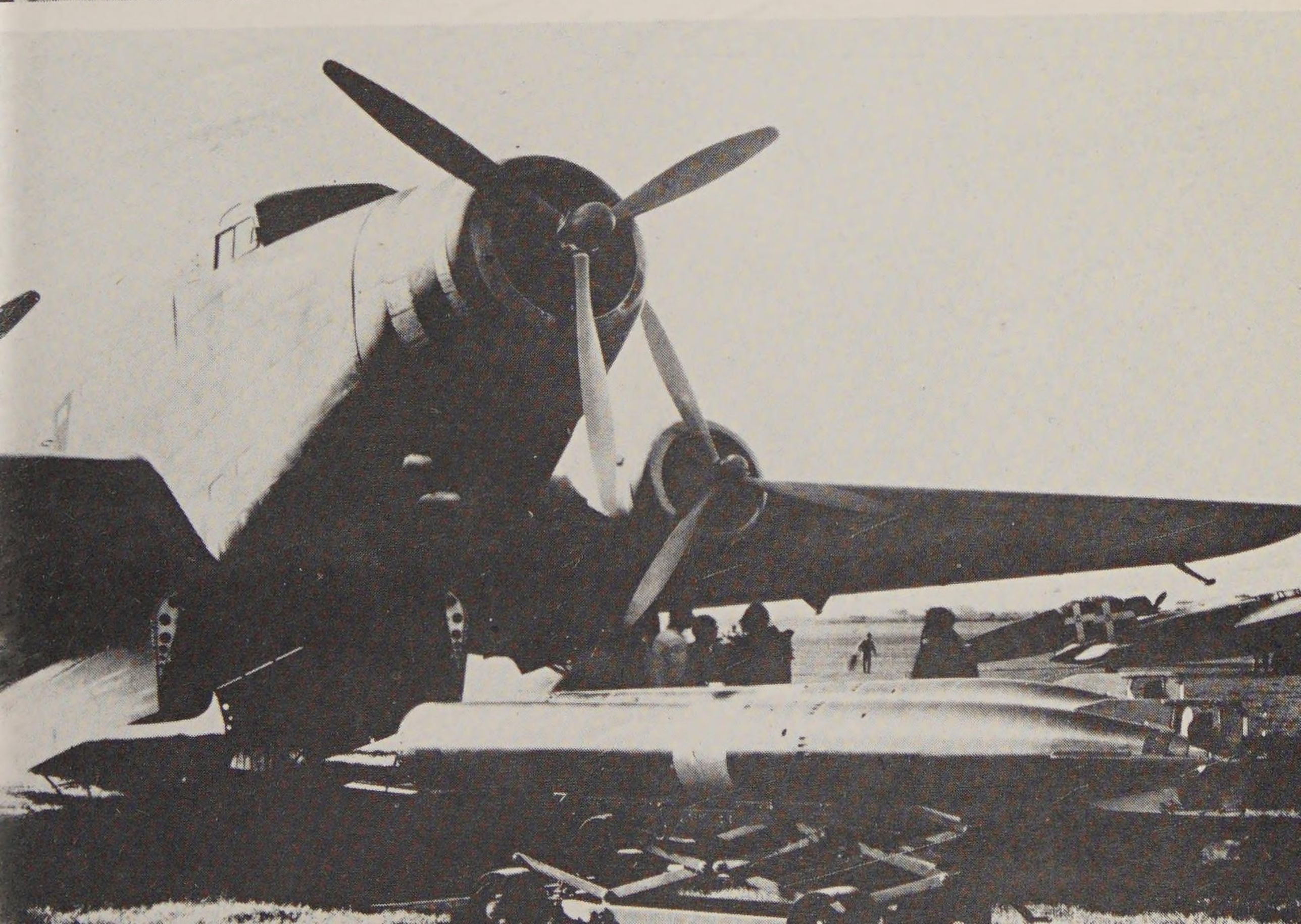
Below: Few monoplane fighters were in service with the Regia Aeronautica on the outbreak of war, but one unit so equipped was 51° Stormo CT, based at Ciampino. Here the unit's Fiat G-50 aircraft are seen lined up for inspection./ *via G. Pini. Bottom:* An early unit to convert from CR 42s to more modern aircraft was 1° Stormo CT, which received early production Macchi C200 fighters. These aircraft were the best fighters available to the Italians in 1940, but suffered their share of trouble, being grounded for several weeks during the summer, following a series of crashes./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Bottom: One of the three principal bomber aircraft in service in 1940 was the Fiat BR20 'Cicogna', these aircraft making up the bulk of the offensive strength of 1ª Squadra Aerea in Northern Italy. Aircraft of 18º Stormo BT are being refuelled prior to a mission. The second aircraft in line is a BR20M, identified by the revised nose contours and bomb-aimer's transparency, which can just be seen beneath the fuselage of the bomber in the foreground./ *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Below:* A BR20 prepares for take-off on a Northern Italian airfield./*via G. Pini*

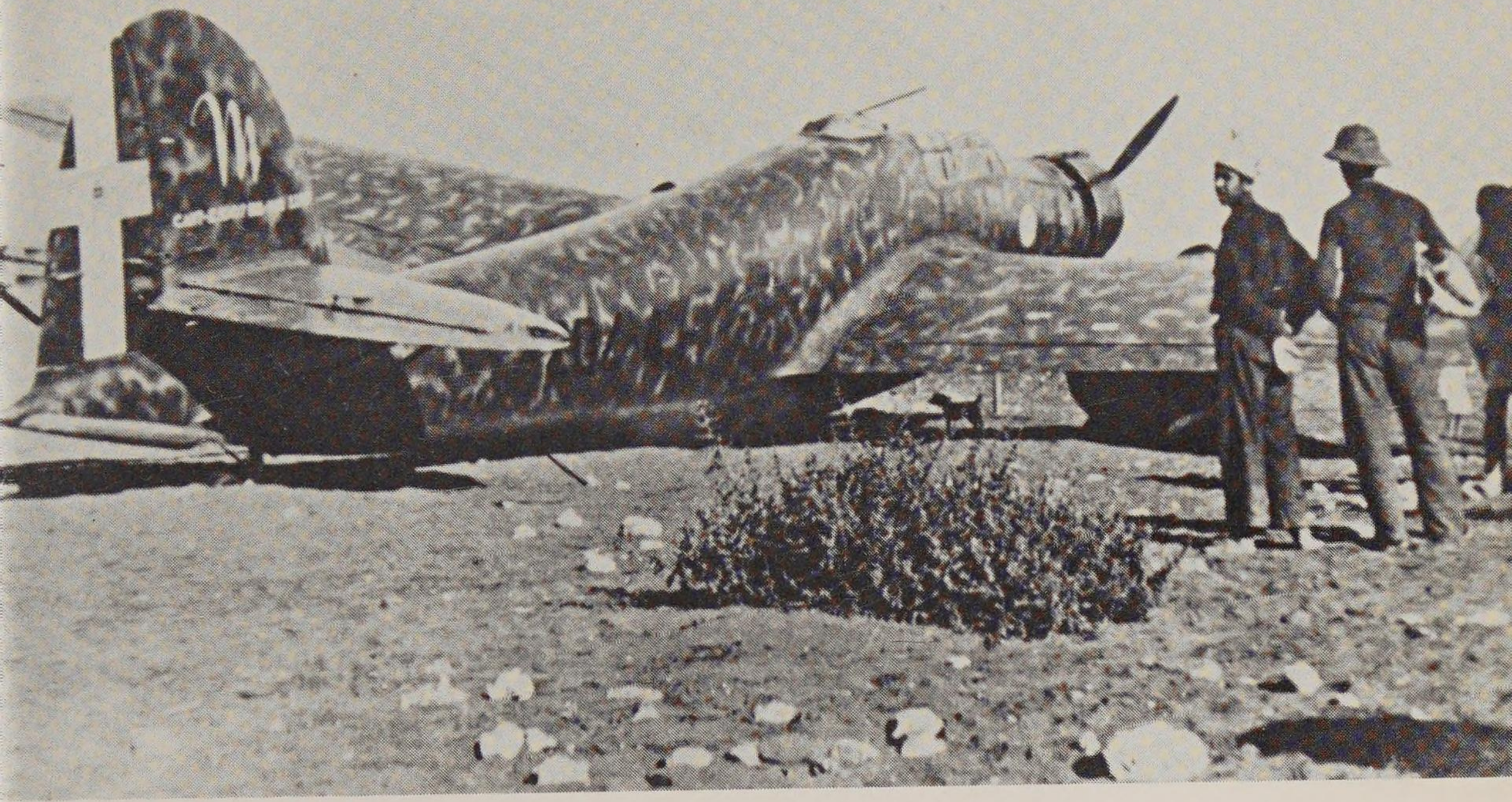
Below: A quartette of Savoia SM79s run up their engines prior to a mission. These aircraft show the two-tone segmental camouflage in use on some Regia Aeronautica aircraft during 1940./*via G. Pini. Bottom:* Armourers man-handle heavy bombs for an SM79./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Right:* Watched by a dog, seated on a fuel drum, armourers prepare bombs for stowage in an SM79, while others arm the top gunner's rearward firing 12.7mm Breda-Safat machine gun. / *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci Bottom Right:* The Regia Aeronautica's most useful and important transport aircraft throughout the war was the trimotor Savoia SM82. One of these is seen here on a Sicilian airfield being loaded with torpedoes for delivery to an anti-shipping unit. In the background are a Breda Ba88 and a Ba65, both ground attack machines./ *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*







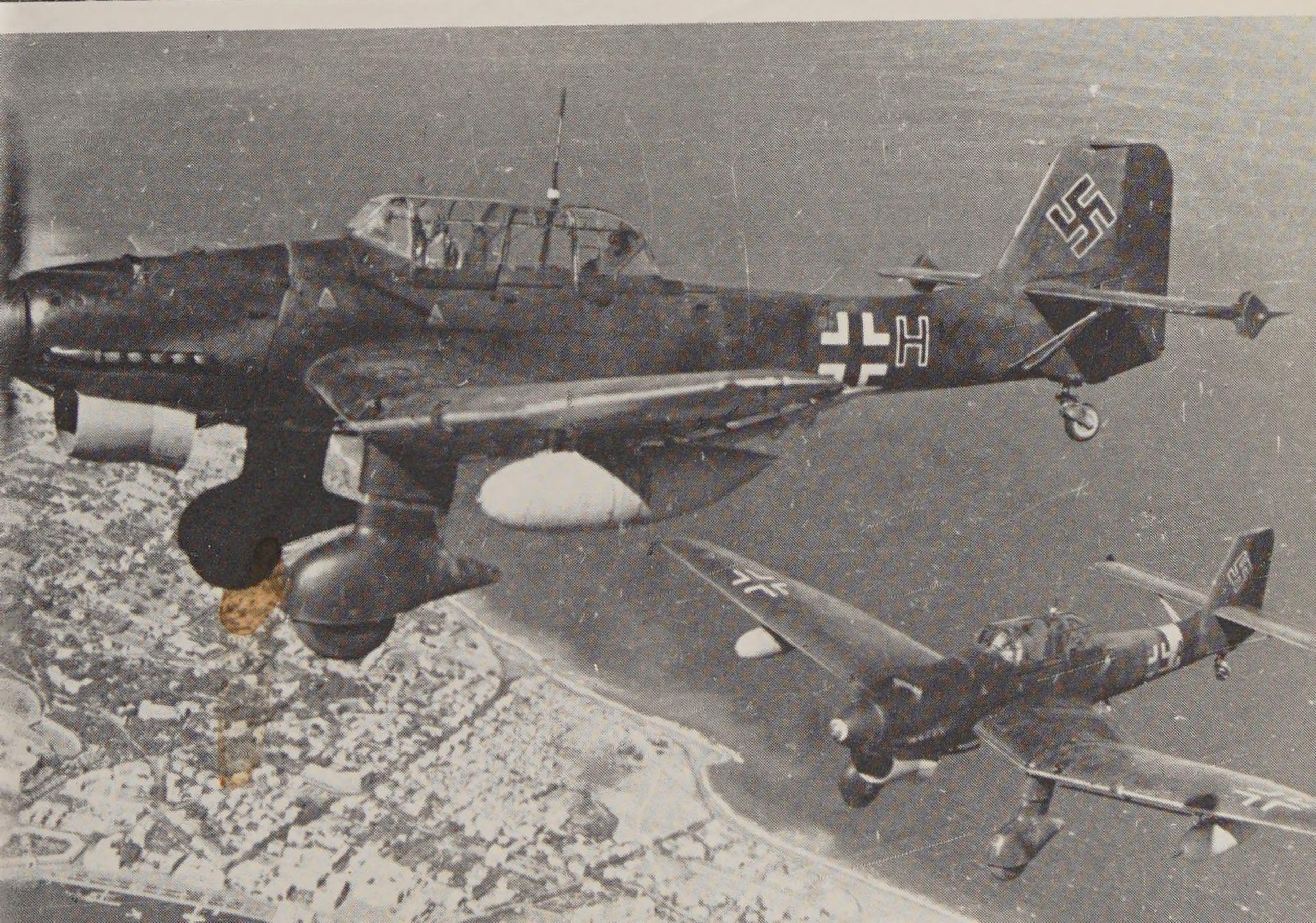
Below: In October 1940 the Italians launched an invasion of Greece from the occupied territory of Albania. Units of Fiat G-50bis fighters were among those based here, and taking part in early attacks over the front. One of these fighters is seen here on an Albanian airfield at this time./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom:* Italian fighter pilots discuss the results of a flight over the Greek front beside one of their G-50bis aircraft./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*



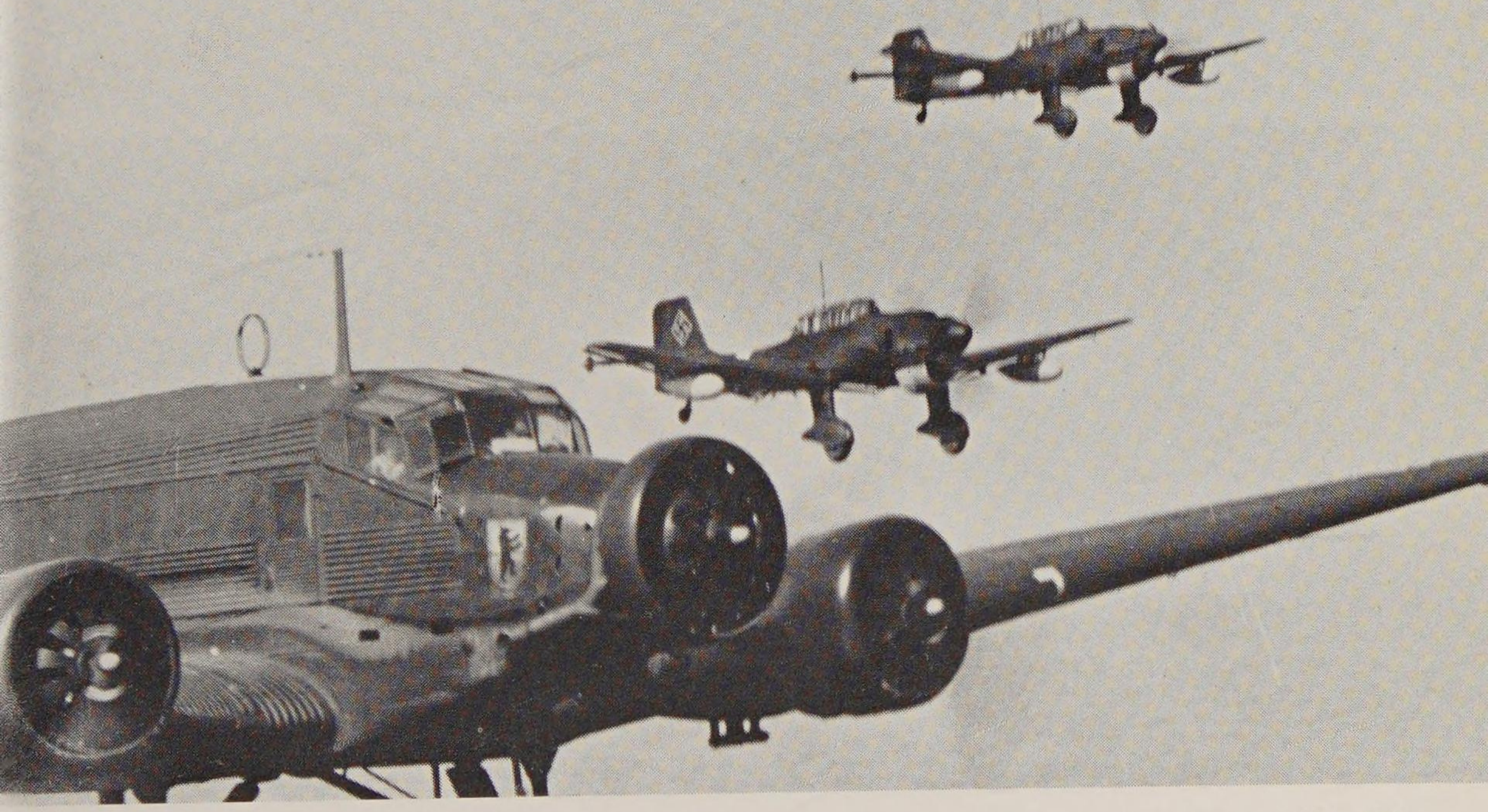
Top: The newest bomber in the Regia Aeronautica's inventory in 1940 was the Cant Z1007bis, another trimotor. A clean aircraft of wooden construction, the Z1007bis enjoyed a fairly long range, and was frequently employed for strategic reconnaissance. One of these aircraft on such a mission force-landed on a Palestinian beach in December 1940, after being damaged by anti-aircraft fire./*Imperial War Museum. Above:* Breda Ba65 single-seat attack aircraft entered service with 50° Stormo Assalto, with the Aeronautica della Libya, late in 1940. The first Libyan Campaign, which began in December 1940, resulted in the capture of many of these aircraft on the ground due either to damage or unserviceability. Consequently, the service life of these aircraft, which were not built in large numbers, was to prove extremely brief. Captured Ba65s of 159ª Squadriglia are seen here on a Libyan airfield in January, 1941./*IWM*

Top left: During the fighting of December 1940–January 1941, Regia Aeronautica losses in Libya were considerable. The equipment of 50° Stormo Assalto is well represented here by a Ba65 and a Fiat CR32 biplane fighter-bomber, both of which are being inspected by British personnel on an African airfield./*IWM. Middle left:* Another type in widespread service in Libya which suffered badly during airfield strafes was the Meridionali Ro37bis reconnaissance and army co-operation biplane, several of which are seen here in various stages of disrepair. These aircraft had been serving with 122ª Squadriglia OA./*IWM. Bottom left:* After initial service over Southern France during which they were engaged in some brief combats with French fighters, the Fiat CR42s of 18° Gruppo C.T. were transferred to Belgium to operate over Southern England. Following the disastrous Italian retreat from Eastern Libya at the start of 1941, the unit was rushed to this area to reinforce the Aeronautica della Libya. The three aircraft seen here are from the Gruppo's 95ª Squadriglia./*via G. Pini Above:* Late in 1940 deliveries were made to the Regia Aeronautica of a quantity of German Junkers Ju87B 'Stuka' dive-bombers. These entered service with 96° Gruppo BaT, and moved to Sicily to begin operations over Malta in September 1940. Here two of these aircraft are seen on a Sicilian airfield; in the foreground is the nose of an SM82 transport, while in the left background a Macchi C200 fighter can just be seen./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Left: By November 1940 96º Gruppo BaT had moved to South-Eastern Italy to operate its Ju87Bs over Greece. One of the unit's aircraft is seen here in flight over the sea./*via G. Pini Bottom left:* The unexpectedly strong resistance of the Greeks led to considerable reinforcement being provided for the air component operating in this area. This included numbers of BR20 bombers, one of which, a BR20M, is seen here being refuelled and serviced./*via G. Pini. Below:* Drums of aviation gasoline are rolled out to refuel waiting SM79 bombers, one of which can be seen in the background, its engines shrouded against dust./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom:* The Italian setbacks in Libya and Greece caused Adolf Hitler to send aid to his Italian ally, in an effort to stabilize the situation in the Mediterranean before the planned German attack on Russia. The first aid to arrive was in the shape of units of the Luftwaffe, which moved initially to Sicily to neutralize the British bases on the island of Malta. Playing an important part in these attacks were the Ju87Bs of I/StG.3, two of which are seen here over Trapani, Sicily, in early 1941./*Bundesarchiv*



Top: Another type to reach the Mediterranean early in 1941 was the high-performance Junkers Ju88A-4 bomber. Two aircraft of LG-1 are seen here above the Mediterranean Sea; both are painted in Desert Sand camouflage./*H. Schliepake via A. Price. Above:* I/KG 26 also arrived in Sicily to take part in the attack on Malta. An He111P of the unit is seen here, already bombed-up for an operation, the crew relaxing in the Mediterranean sun./*Bundesarchiv*



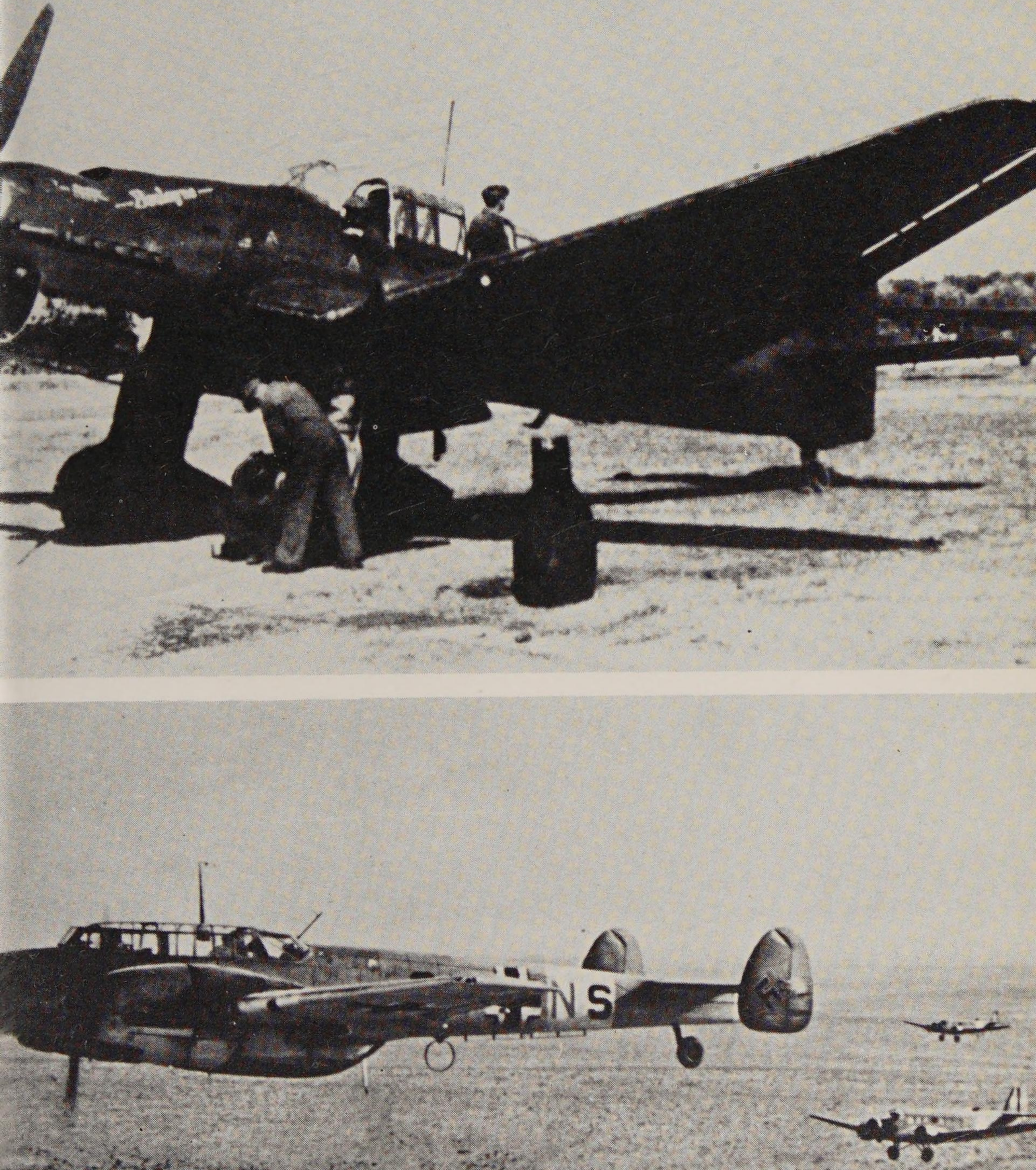
Top: The nose of a I/KG 26 He111P shows clearly the Gruppe's 'Löwen' (Lion) unit badge. Note the navigational instrument mounted on the cabin roof./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* A very important aircraft to the Luftwaffe on all fronts was the ubiquitous Junkers Ju52/3m transport—the faithful 'Tante Ju'. A pair of Ju87R dive-bombers here escort one of these transports across the sea to Africa. The transport carries the famous 'Bear of Berlin' on its nose, identifying it as an aircraft of III/KGzbV 1./*Bundesarchiv*

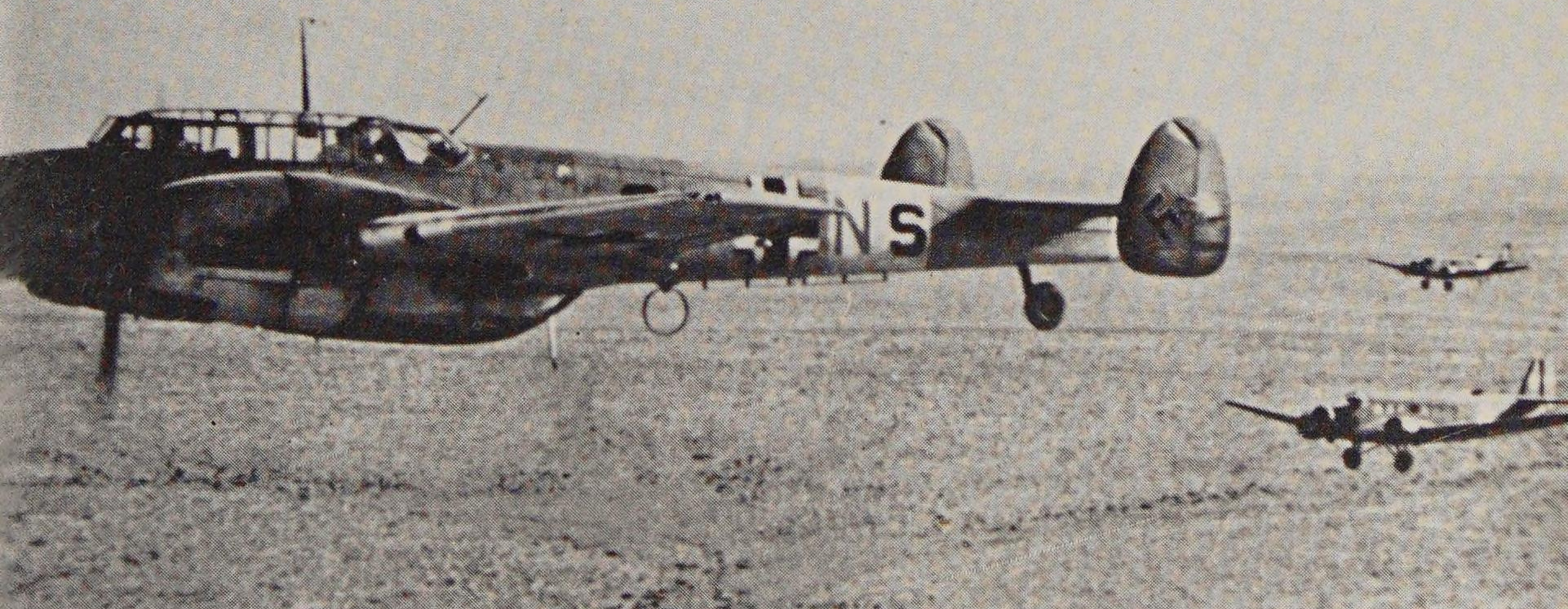
Below: With the Luftwaffe bombers and fighters, a number of Dornier Do24 trimotor flyingboats also arrived in Sicily for air-sea rescue duties. One of these aircraft is seen here at anchor off the coast./*Bundesarchiv*

Bottom: Close-up of the tail and rear fuselage of a Do24 shows well the potent 20mm. cannon in the dorsal turret. Note another of these aircraft in the background./*Bundesarchiv*

Below: The arrival of German aircraft in Sicily allowed more Italian units to be despatched to Albania. Here BR20M bombers of 203ª Squadriglia, 40º Gruppo, 38º Stormo BT, head for a target in Greece./*via G. Pini. Bottom:* An SM79 undergoes engine maintenance in a blast pen in Sicily./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Left: SM79 and bombs on a Sicilian airfield./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom left:* Cant Z1007bis bombers of 261ª Squadriglia head out on a raid early in 1941. These aircraft operated quite extensively over Greece throughout most of the campaign there./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Below:* By early 1941 96° Gruppo BaT Ju87Bs were being recalled from the Greek front, and one squadriglia of these aircraft moved back to Sicily, flying on from here to Western Libya. One of these aircraft is seen here on a Sicilian airfield, carrying the legend 'Boulogne' on the engine cowling./*via G. Pini. Bottom:* One of the first German units to fly on to Libya from Sicily was III/ZG 26, equipped with twin-engined Messerschmitt Bf110C 'zerstroer' long-range fighters. One of these aircraft is seen escorting a pair of Ju52/3m transports low over typical scrub-covered North African desert landscape./*G. W. Joos via A. Price*





Top: Ju87Bs were also in Africa by March 1941, and one of these aircraft of II/StG 2 is seen here on a desert landing ground, still carrying European-style camouflage paint./*Bundesarchiv*
Above: The arrival of Wehrmacht troops at Tripoli for service with the new Deutsches Afrika Korps, brought Henschel Hs126 army co-operation aircraft to the area. Here skimpily-clad ground-crew shroud one of these aircraft of 2(H)/14 for the night./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: Early losses to British Hurricanes in the Desert of both Ju87s and Bf110s, showed clearly the need for the presence of effective single-engined fighters, and the Messerschmitt Bf109Es of I/JG 27 were ordered from France to Libya. Coincidentally known as the 'Afrika Gruppe', and carrying on its aircraft a badge comprising a map of Africa with the heads of a negro and a panther superimposed upon it, the unit was to achieve great success. A yellow-nosed Bf109E is seen here on a Sicilian airfield en route to Africa; note the He111 of I/KG 26 in the background./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* Even before the arrival of I/JG 27 in Libya, a smaller unit of Bf109Es, 7/JG 26, had arrived in Sicily during February 1941 for operations over Malta. One of this unit's aircraft, also yellow-nosed, and carrying a long-range fuel tank, makes an interesting comparison with the previous photograph./*Bundesarchiv*

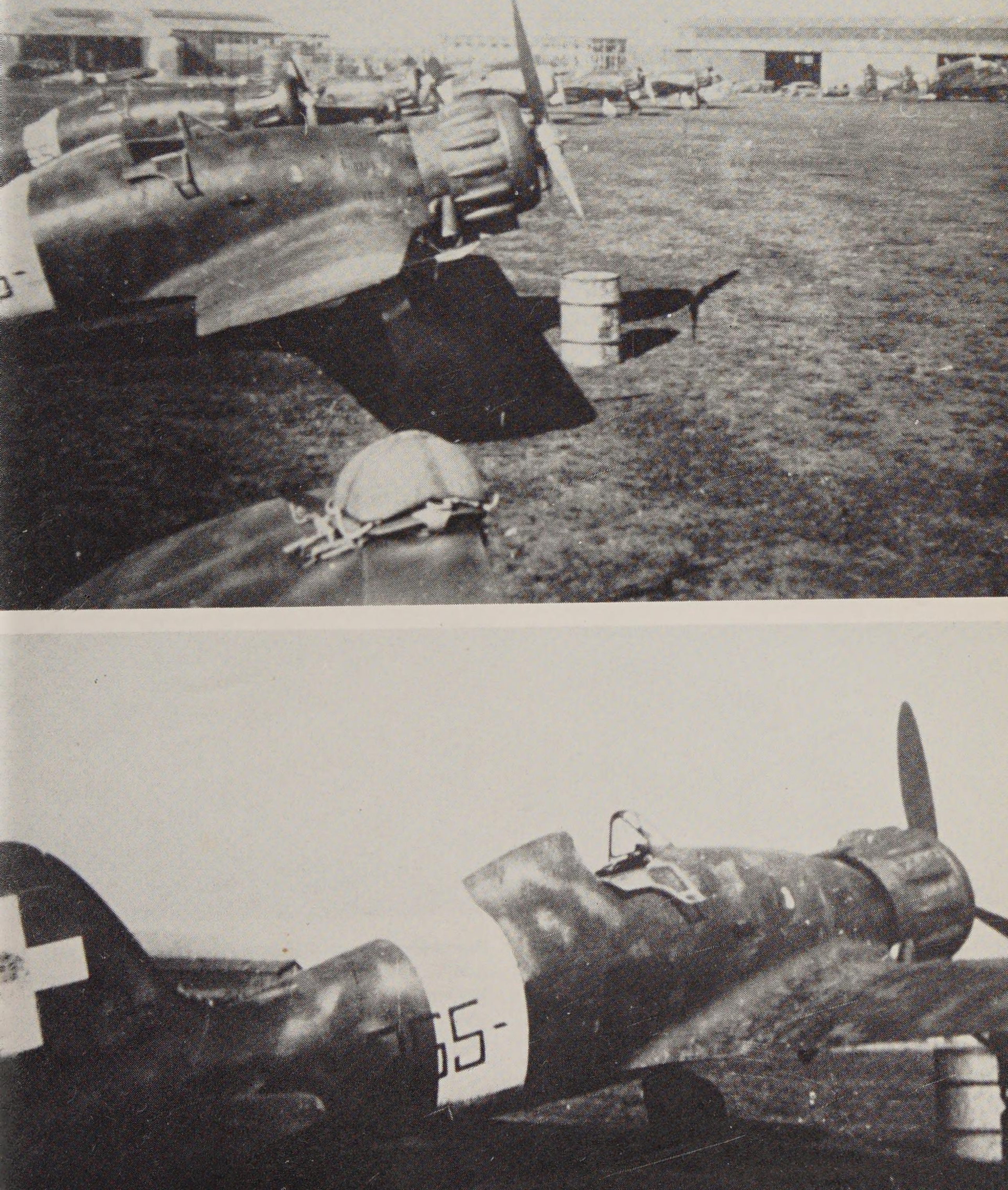
Below: In the foreground is a Bf109E of 7/JG 26; this is the aircraft of the Staffelkapitän, Oblt Joachim Müncheberg. Behind this is the Bf-110C flown by Maj Schulze-Dickow, Gruppenkommandeur of III/ZG 26, while in the background are He111Ps of I/KG 26, representative of the bombers in Sicily which these two fighter units were escorting over Malta./ *Bundesarchiv*

Bottom: Obit Joachime Müncheberg, Staffelkapitän of 7/JG 26, in the cockpit of his Bf109E in Sicily. Already awarded the Knight's Cross for his performance during the Battle of Britain, Müncheberg was to claim 20 Hurricanes over Malta during the first five months of 1941./ *Bundesarchiv*

Below: Partners. On a Sicilian airfield a Bf109E of 7/JG 26 taxies past a CR42, raised on trestles for gun harmonisation./*Bundesarchiv*

Bottom: A CR42 being refuelled on an airfield in Sicily. Note the two SM82 transports in the background./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Left: Bombs for a Cant Z506B reconnaissance-bomber floatplane are brought to the aircraft on a raft, which is moored to the floats while the missiles are winched up into the bomb-bay./ *Stato Maggiore via C.Ricci. Bottom left:* By April 1941 the British forces in Libya were in retreat in the face of the new Axis forces facing them. Taking an active part in the fighting at this time were the Italian Ju87Bs of 96° Gruppo BaT, seen here taking off from a desert landing ground./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Below:* Macchi C.200 fighters of 365ª Squadriglia, 150º Gruppo CT on Valona airfield, Albania, in early Spring 1941. Note the BR20 in the right background./*via G. Pini. Bottom:* Another view of a Valona-based MC200 of 365ª Squadriglia. /*via G. Pini*



Top: While many MC200s were operating over Greece in early 1941, others were flying from Sicily over Malta. Here an aircraft of 165ª Squadriglia, 12º Gruppo CT is refuelled on the edge of an airfield./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* Several further units of Fiat G-50s had been rushed across to Africa by the Spring of 1941, and one of these is seen here, well shrouded against the desert sand. In the background is one of the welcome SM82s, bringing supplies, replacements and mail from home./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: Rarely seen in the Mediterranean, this Dornier Do215 reconnaissance aircraft of an unidentified unit prepares to take off from a Sicilian airfield. SM82s can be seen in the background./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Above: Much more frequently seen—even by the Sicilian sheep—were the Junkers Ju88Ds of reconnaissance unit Aufklarungsgruppe 121./*Bundesarchiv*

Left: Representative Luftwaffe aircraft on a North African airfield. A Ju88A-4 of LG-1 exhibits clearly the unit crest and the aircraft's forward defensive armament. Behind this is a Ju87B, and in the background a Ju52/3m./ *Bundesarchiv. Below:* A sand-camouflaged Ju88A-4 of LG 1 in flight over North Africa./ *Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* Tropicalized Bf109E of I/JG 27 prepares for take-off on a desert airfield, watched critically by the ground crew. Note that the usual orifice in the airscrew boss has been fitted with a neat fairing—undoubtedly to exclude the ever-present sand./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: Still retaining European-type camouflage, and without a yellow nose, this Bf109E streaking above the Desert is flown by Lt Ludwig Franzisket; the 'arrow-head' marking shows it to be the aircraft of the Gruppen-Adjutant of I/JG 27./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* A pristine He111P of I/KG 26, laden with a heavy bomb beneath the fuselage, heads for Malta./*Bundesarchiv*

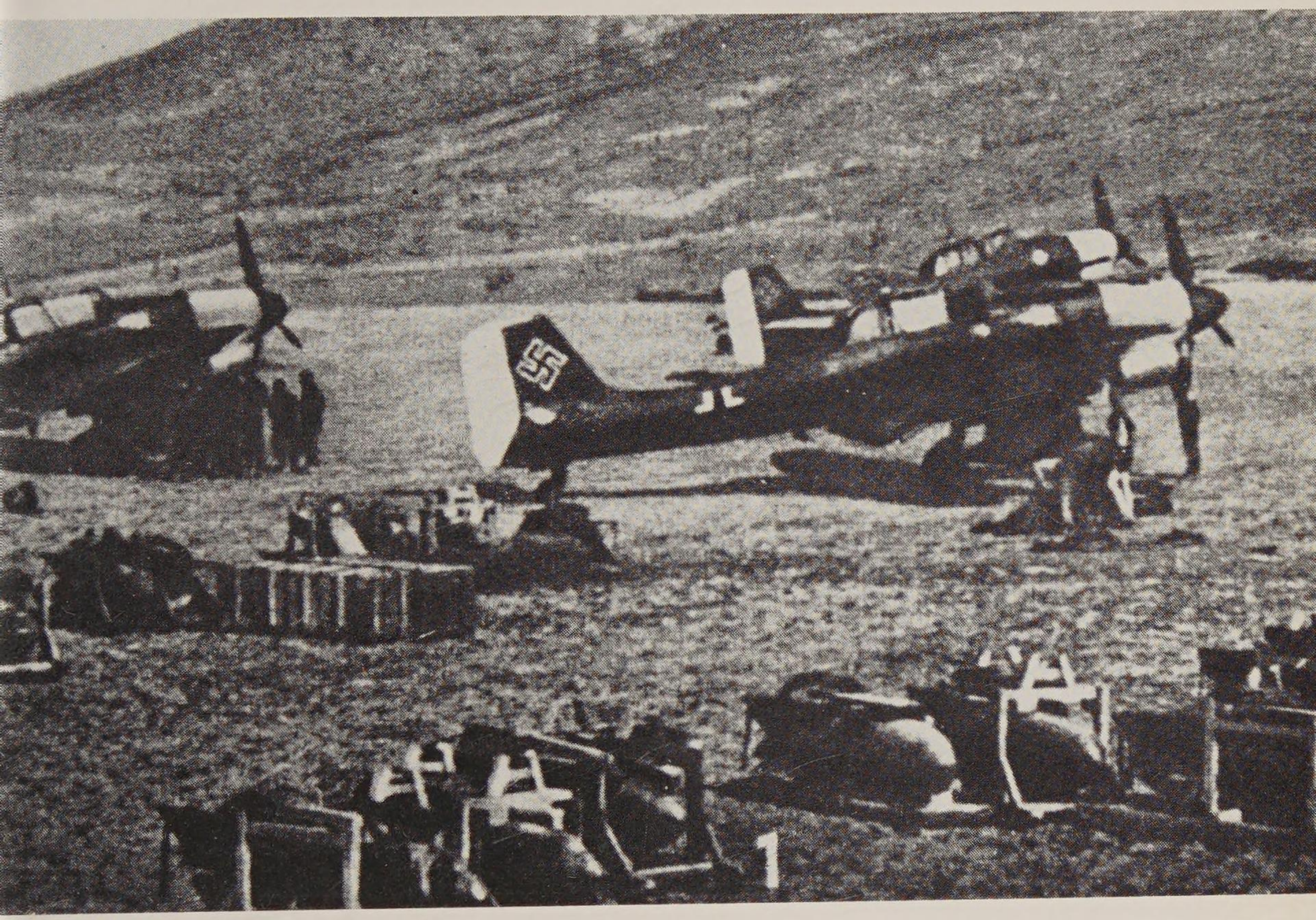
Top: He111 on a Sicilian airfield; note that the side of the fuselage has been repainted, apparently obliterating the usual four figure/letter code, and replacing it with a single individual aircraft identification letter./*via G. Pini. Above:* An SM82 on a Sicilian airfield./*via G. Pini*

Top: Parked among the palm trees bordering an airfield in the coastal belt of the Cyrenaican 'bulge' are these CR42s of 155ª Squadriglia, 3º Gruppo CT./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* On April 6th 1941 German forces launched a fierce 'Blitzkrieg' attack on Yugoslavia and Greece. Operating over the area as a part of Luftflotte 4 were the Dornier Do17Z-2 bombers of KG 3. This aircraft, 5K+ER, is serving with 7 Staffel of III Gruppe./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: With its engine cowlings painted in campaign yellow, a Ju88A-4 of an unidentified unit is seen over the Balkans in April 1941./ *Bundesarchiv*. *Above:* Fliegerkorps VIII of Luftflotte 4 operated from airfields in Bulgaria, supporting forces advancing down the Rupel Pass into Salonica. One of the units of this Fliegerkorps was III/JG 27. Operating its Bf109Es as fighter-bombers (Jabos) the unit suffered heavy losses on the opening day of the campaign to RAF Hurricanes. Two of the Gruppe's aircraft are seen here being bombed-up./*Bundesarchiv*

Below: More III/JG 27 Bf109Es receiving their bombs. Note that the aircraft in the foreground has the later model of cockpit canopy than that in the previous illustration./*Bundesarchiv*
Bottom: This Bf109E which has crash-landed on a Greek airfield and has been placed under British guard, is an aircraft of III/JG 77. The Gruppe badge on the nose and the marking on the rear fuselage identify the unit; the additional marking beneath the cockpit appears to be personal to the pilot, and is not identified./*IWM*

Below: Ju87Bs with yellow rudders and engine cowlings are seen here on an airfield in the Balkans; they are probably aircraft of StG2. Note the bombs in the foreground./*via A. Price*
Bottom: Ju87Rs of StG2, this time without yellow campaign paint, on a Greek airfield. In the foreground is a shattered RAF Hurricane from which souvenir hunters have stripped every bit of fabric carrying a marking or serial./*Bundesarchiv*

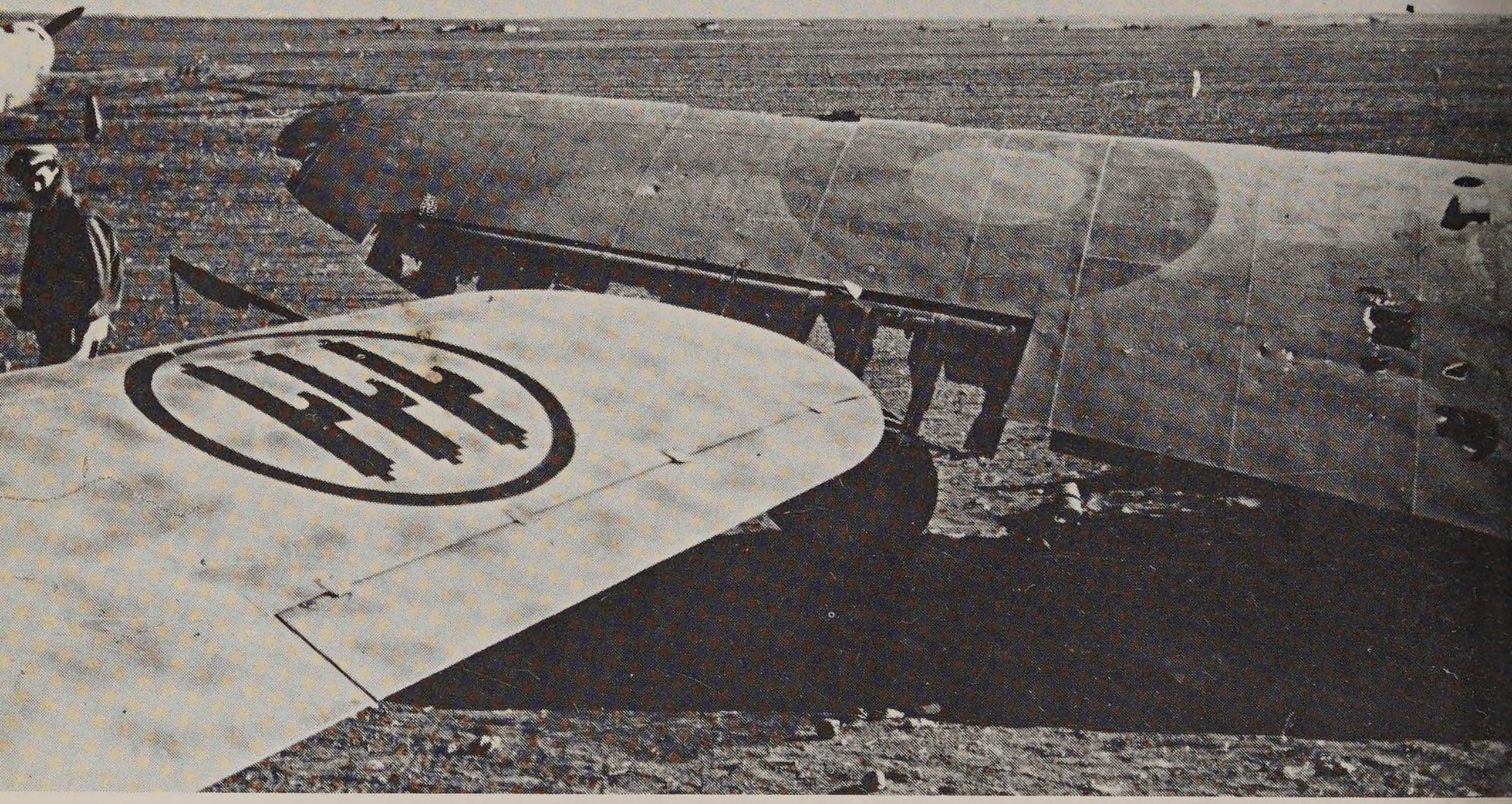


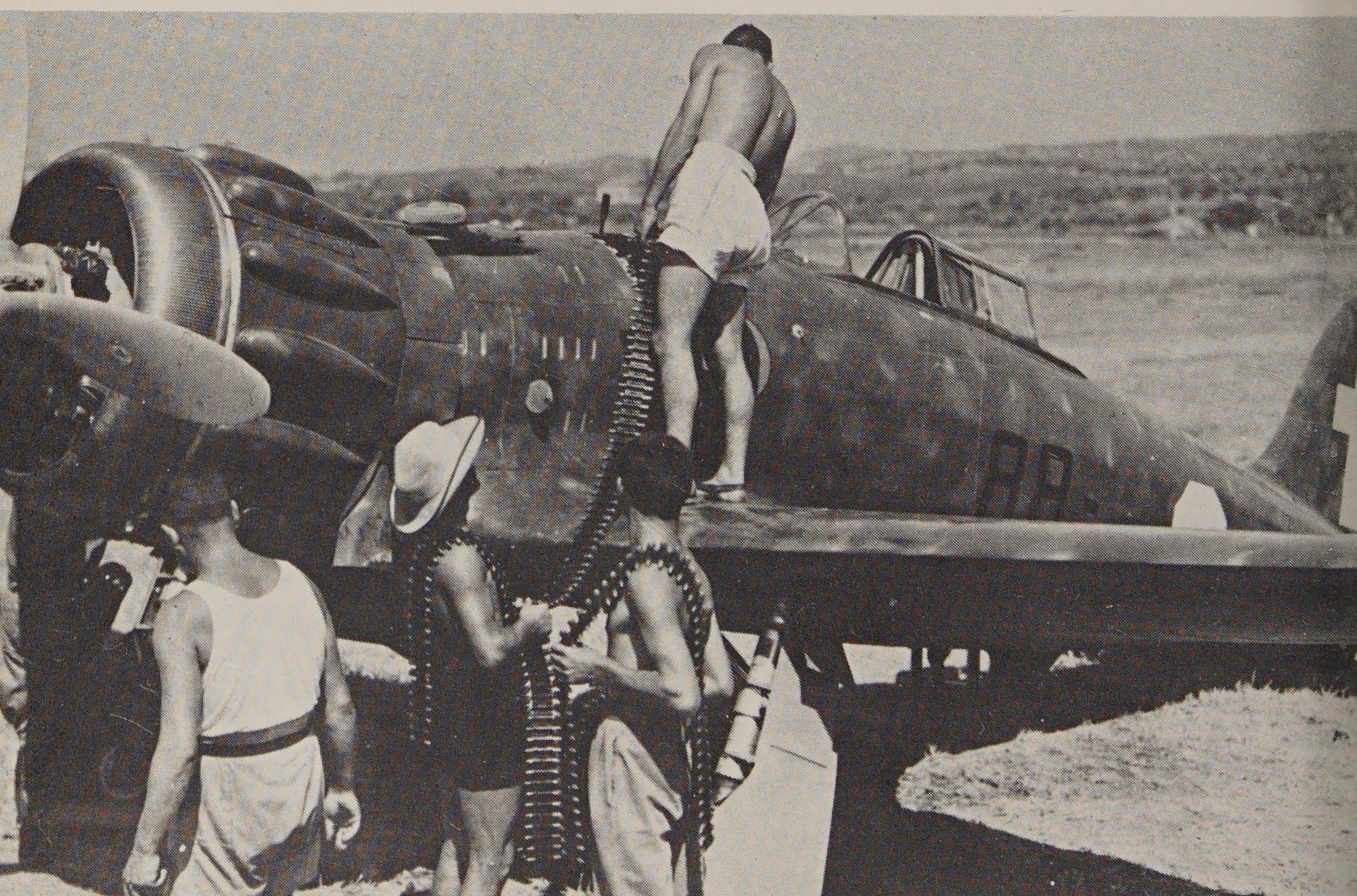
Top: Bf110C long-range fighters of ZG 26 played a major part in the Luftwaffe's activities in Greece. Here two of them are seen in flight over the Greek coast./*Bundesarchiv*

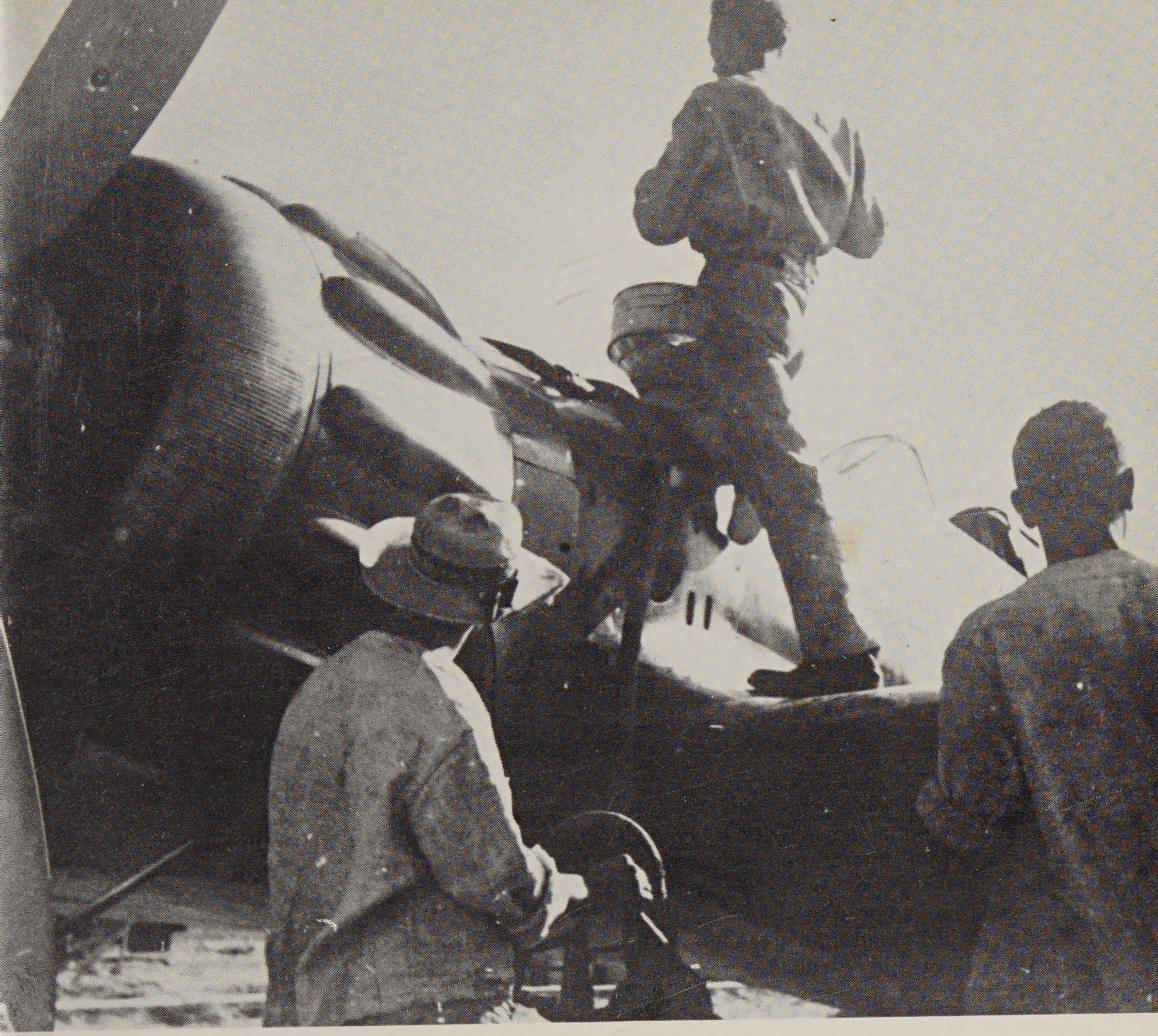
Above: Co-operation; a G-50bis of the Regia Aeronautica and a Bf110C of III/ZG 26 formate over the Mediterranean./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: With Greece in their hands, the Germans brought in a number of Heinkel He59B-2 float-planes for air-sea rescue duties over the Aegean sea. The two aircraft in this photograph both display the yellow rudders and engine cowlings common to many Luftwaffe aircraft over the Balkans./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* In July 1941 the first two Gruppi of MC200s arrived in Libya; one of these was 153° Gruppo CT, 'Asso di Bastoni', an aircraft from which is seen by a derelict British Bristol Blenheim on a desert airfield./*via G. Pini*

Below: Another view of 153° Gruppo CT MC-200s on a desert airfield./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom:* An early production MC200 serving with 88ª Squadriglia, 6° Gruppo, of 1° Stormo CT at Catania, Sicily, is re-armed after a sortie over Malta./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci Right:* Fuel for an MC200 of 1° Stormo CT is strained through a fine mesh sieve in a funnel as part of the refuelling process./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom right:* Refuelled and re-armed, and with the engine running, the MC200 is ready for its next mission, and the pilot then climbs aboard./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*



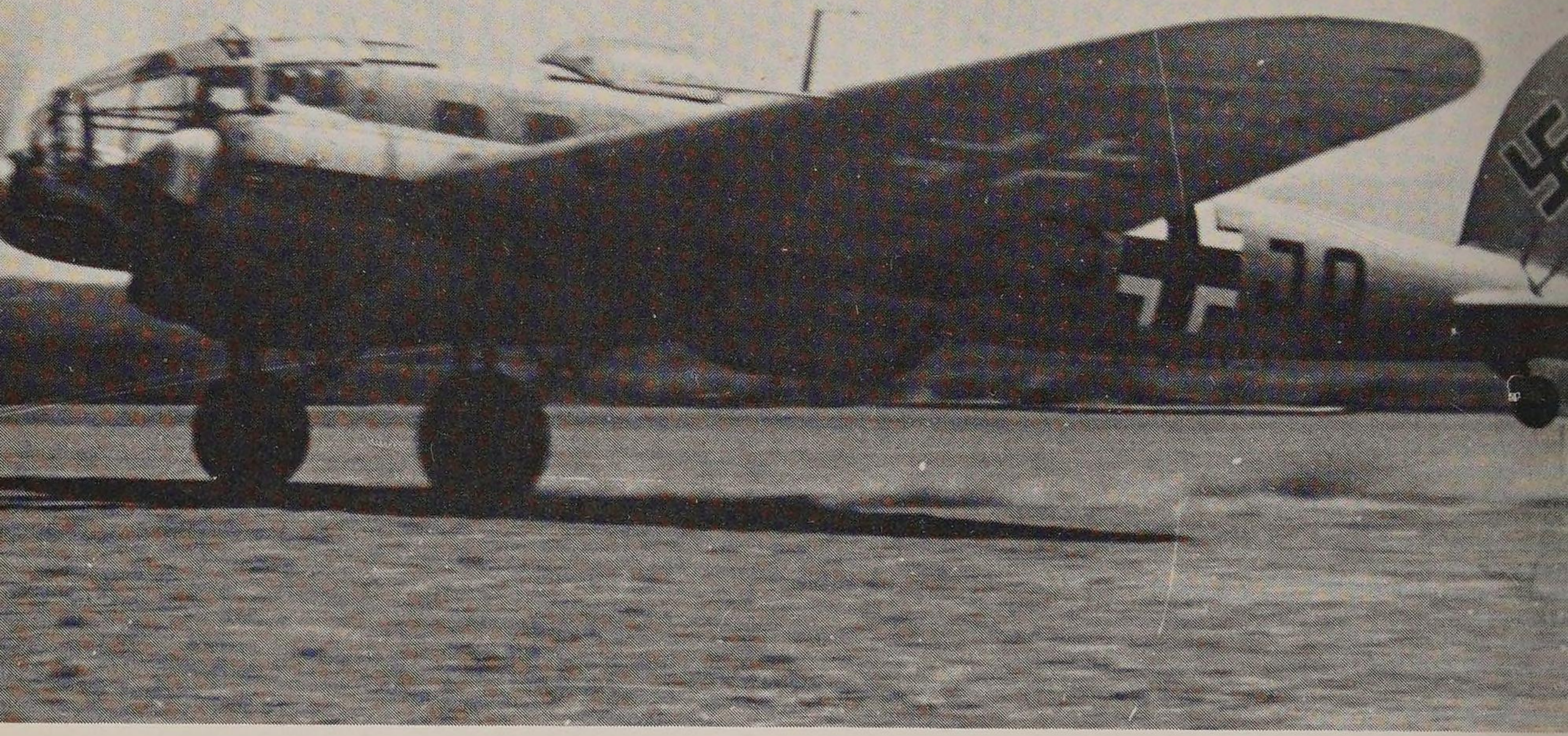


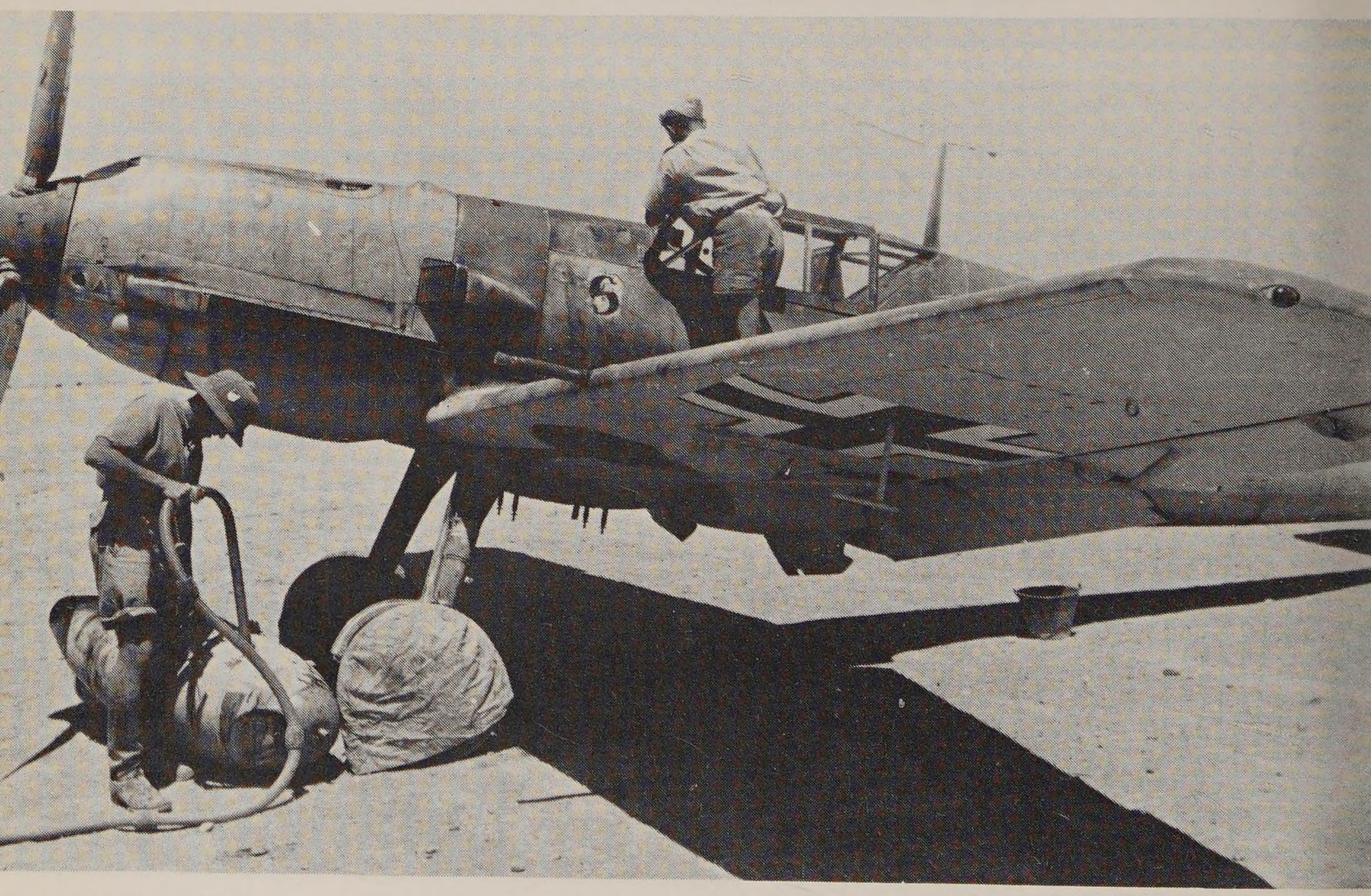


Above: Operating regularly over Tobruk during the early summer of 1941, German divebombers achieved much success against the Allied shipping attempting to supply the beleaguered port. This Ju87R of 4/StG2 flying over the Libyan coastline with the Afrika Korps palm painted on its nose, is typical of the aircraft involved./*Bundesarchiv. Top right:* A Henschel Hs126 of 2(H)/14 is prepared for an army co-operation mission over the Desert./*Bundesarchiv Bottom right:* By mid summer 1941 Ju87s were beginning to appear with desert camouflage, typified by this fully-laden R-2 of I/StG1. Note the Gruppe's bird motif on the nose./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: A5+HL of I/StG1, similarly camouflaged to that in the last illustration, has come to grief, and is seen here somewhat the worse for wear, in British hands./*IWM. Above:* Although fairly well-known, this photograph of a I/JG 27 Bf109E flying alongside the African coastline, is used here as it portrays so well the typical 1941 Desert camouflage applied to Luftwaffe aircraft. The aircraft, 'Black 8', is flown by Lt Werner Schroer, later one of the most successful German fighter 'Experten' in the Mediterranean theatre./*Sturm via H. Ring*

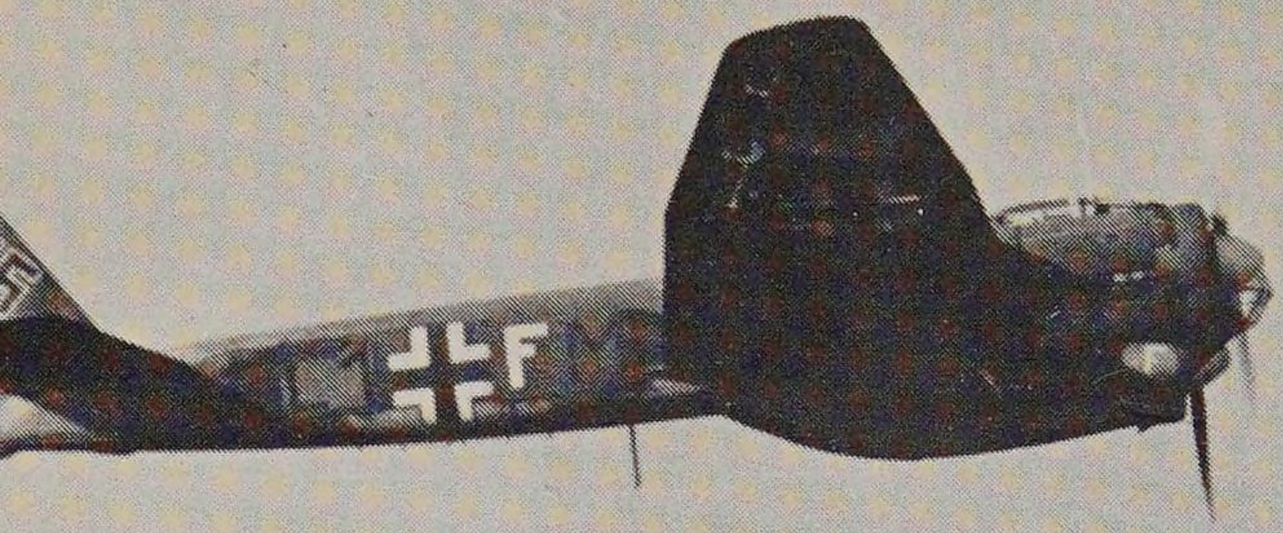
Top: An immaculate Bf109E of I/JG 27 stands behind the Gruppe ceremonial standard during a parade at the unit's Libyan base./*Bundesarchiv*
Above: A Fieseler Fi156C Storch liaison and spotter aircraft in the Desert. These STOL aircraft were attached in ones and twos to Wehrmacht headquarters and Luftwaffe units for general duties, proving extremely versatile and useful in Africa and elsewhere./*Bundesarchiv*

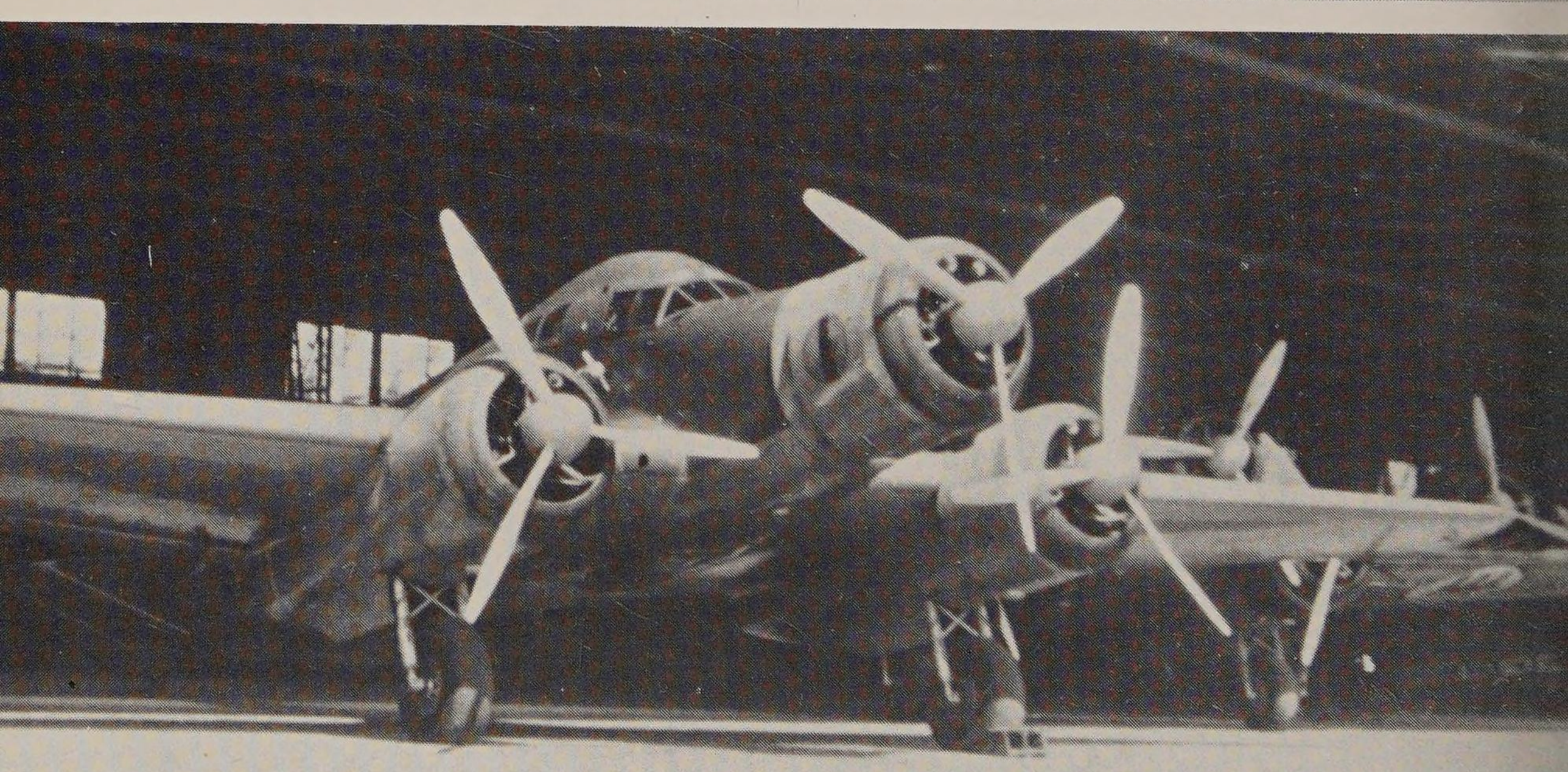




Top: An He111 in Desert Sand camouflage paint operating from an airfield in Tripolitania. It will be noted that this aircraft does not appear to be fitted with any armament, and it is possible that it was a transport conversion of the standard bomber./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* In June 1941 7/JG 26 moved on from Sicily to join I/JG 27 for a short period of operations in Libya. One of the Staffel's Bf109Es is seen here having its long-range tank filled before being fitted beneath the fuselage./ *Bundesarchiv*

Top: A substantial formation of Ju87Bs over North Africa; at least 16 aircraft are visible. The nearest aircraft appear to be from StG1./*Bundesarchiv*. *Above:* A trio of Ju87Bs are escorted by a 'Rotte' of Bf109Es from I/JG 27./*Bundesarchiv*

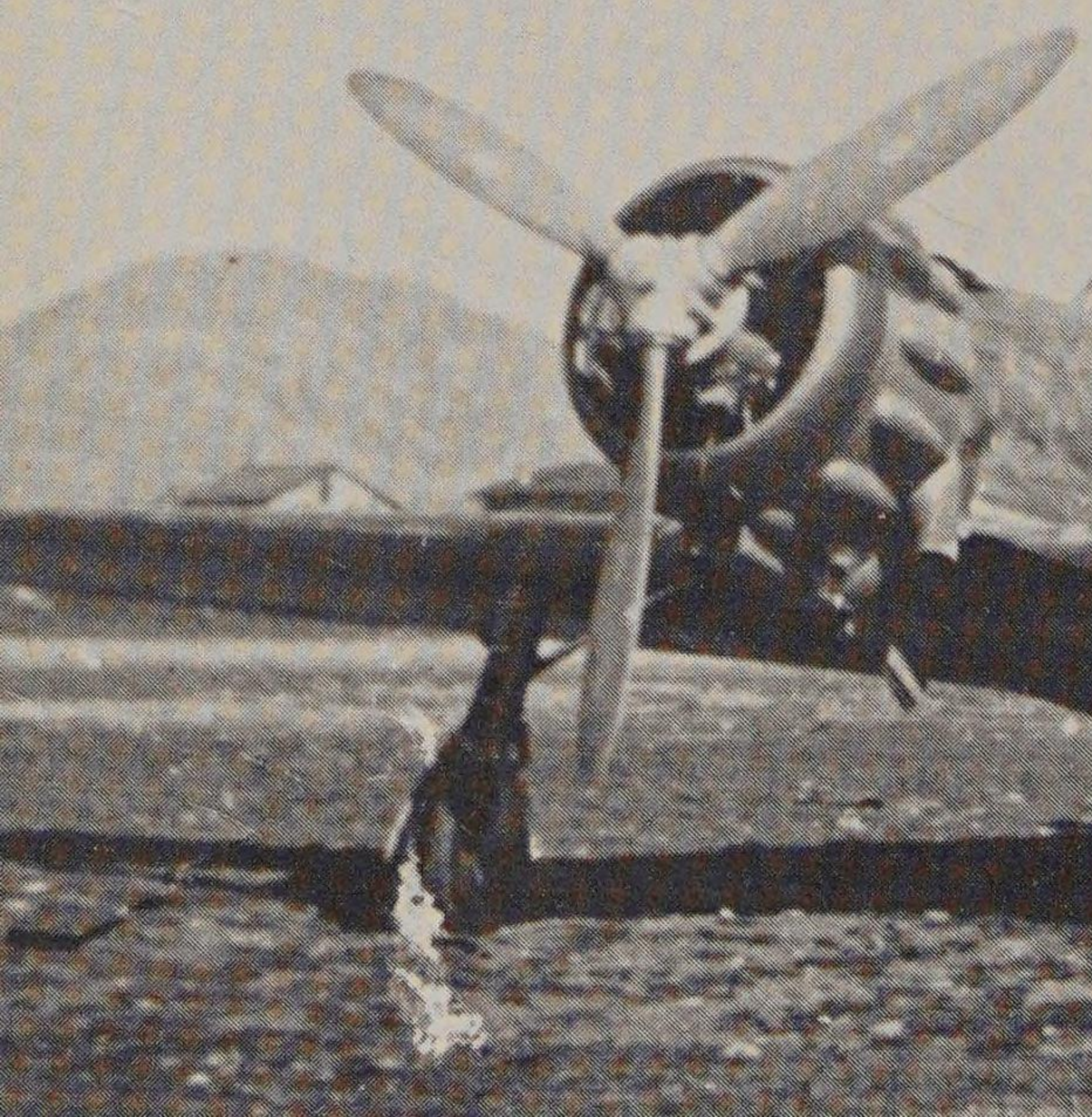




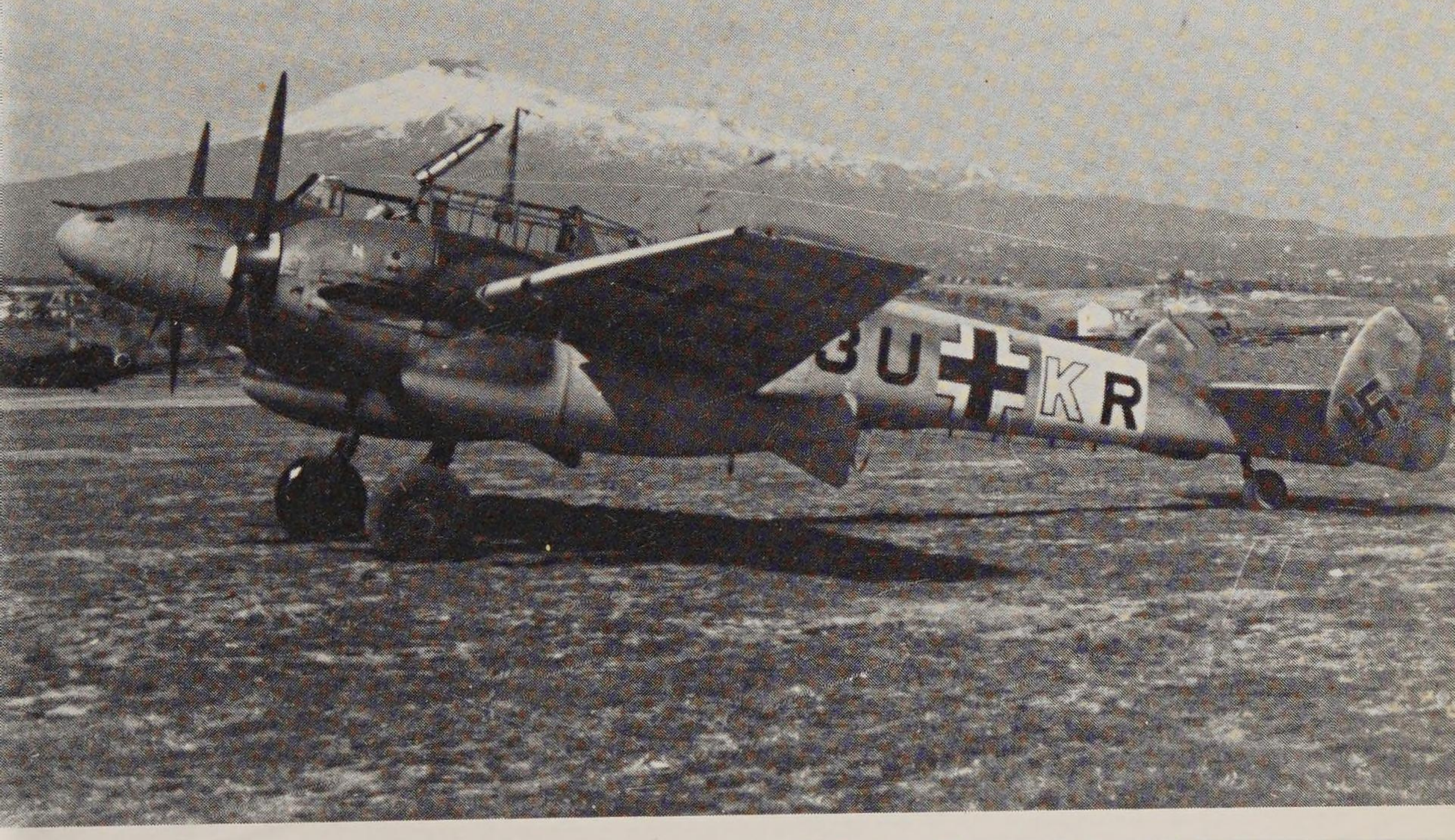
Top: Two Gruppen of LG 1 were based on Crete by mid summer 1941, and here three of the unit's Ju88A-4s are seen climbing away from the island on a mission. / *Bundesarchiv*
Above: After its experience over Greece and Malta, the Fiat BR 20 had been relegated to night-time operations. Despite growing numbers of Cant Z1007bis aircraft, the SM79, three of which are seen here in a hangar, remained the most important Italian bomber throughout 1941. These aircraft were now proving their worth also as torpedo-dropping aircraft./*via J. Day*

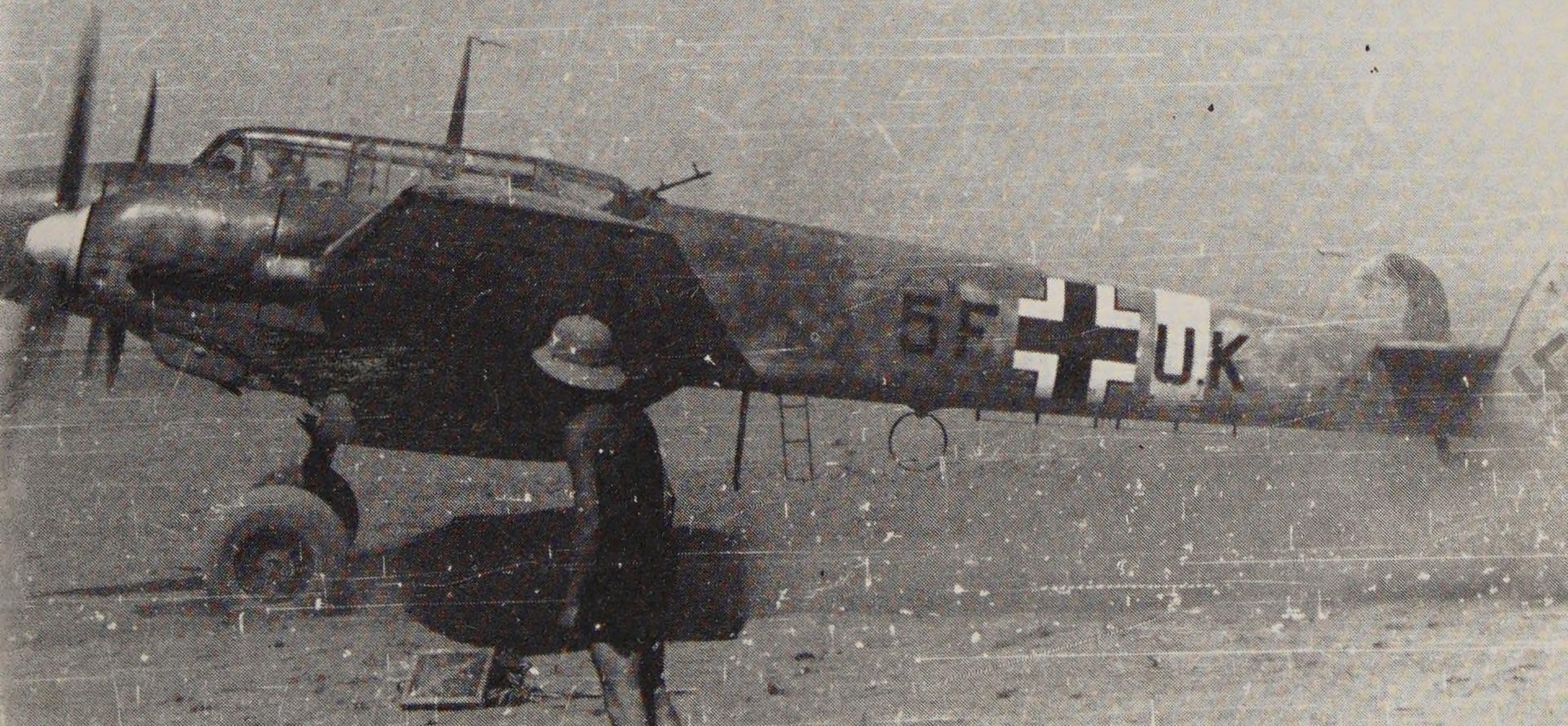
Below: Ju87Bs of StG2 on a dusty desert airfield in mid 1941./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* Small numbers of He111s remained in the Mediterranean area throughout 1941/42, operating both at night as bombers, and by day against Allied shipping in the torpedo-dropping role. An aircraft of an unidentified unit is seen here on an airfield in Sicily./*Bundesarchiv*

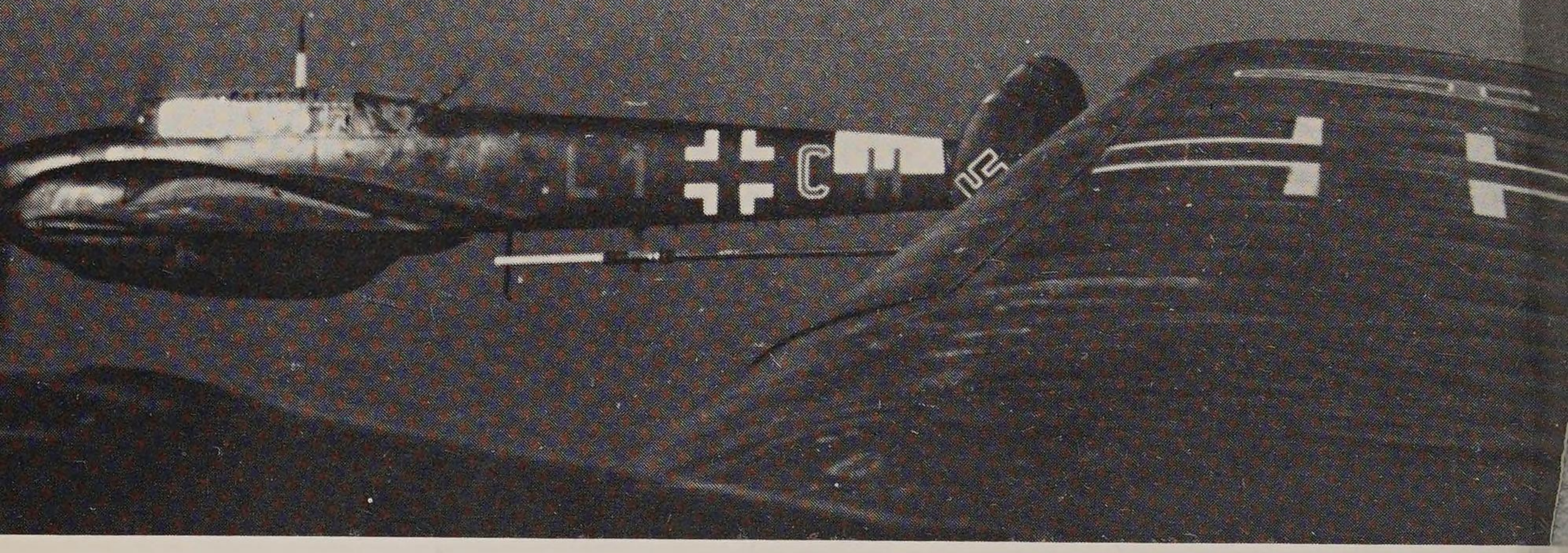
Below: A yellow-nosed Bf109E of I/JG 27 begins to raise the inevitable dust cloud as it taxies across a desert landing ground./*Bundesarchiv*
Bottom: Macchi C200s were well on the way to becoming the most numerous Italian fighters in service by late summer 1941. Those on airfields in Albania and Greece, such as this one here, had little to occupy them but training at this time however./*via G. Pini*



Below: By mid 1941 the Bf110s of III/ZG 26 were operating all over the area, frequently the three Staffeln being widely dispersed throughout the Mediterranean, in Crete, Sicily and Libya. Apart from some ground attack work in Africa, they operated mainly escorting transport aircraft over the sea. One such fighter is seen here on a Sicilian airfield with a Ju52/3m in the background./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* The Bf110 had operated over the Mediterranean in other than the long-range fighter role since the arrival of the Luftwaffe in March 1941. 2(H)/14 possessed a few of these aircraft for tactical and photographic reconnaissance duties, operating alongside Bf109Es and the more numerous Hs126s. One of the unit's aircraft, a Bf110F, is seen here running up its engines prior to take-off. The guns in the nose in this case are only dummies; the space normally reserved for ammunition drums was taken up in these aircraft by a camera pack./*Bundesarchiv*







Top: Another use for the Bf110 was as a night fighter; in the summer of 1941 1/NJG 3 was formed from within LG 1, and equipped with Bf110D-1/U1 aircraft, one of which is seen from the cockpit of a second, flying low over the sea. This unit did not operate for long over the Mediterranean before being ordered to Europe to assist in the defence against the growing night raids on the Fatherland./*Bundesarchiv*

Above: Italian Ju87Bs of 96° Gruppo BaT were still active over Libya, and here three aircraft of the Gruppo's 239ª Squadriglia are seen over the African coastline. The aircraft have now been painted with yellow recognition bands on nose and rear fuselage./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

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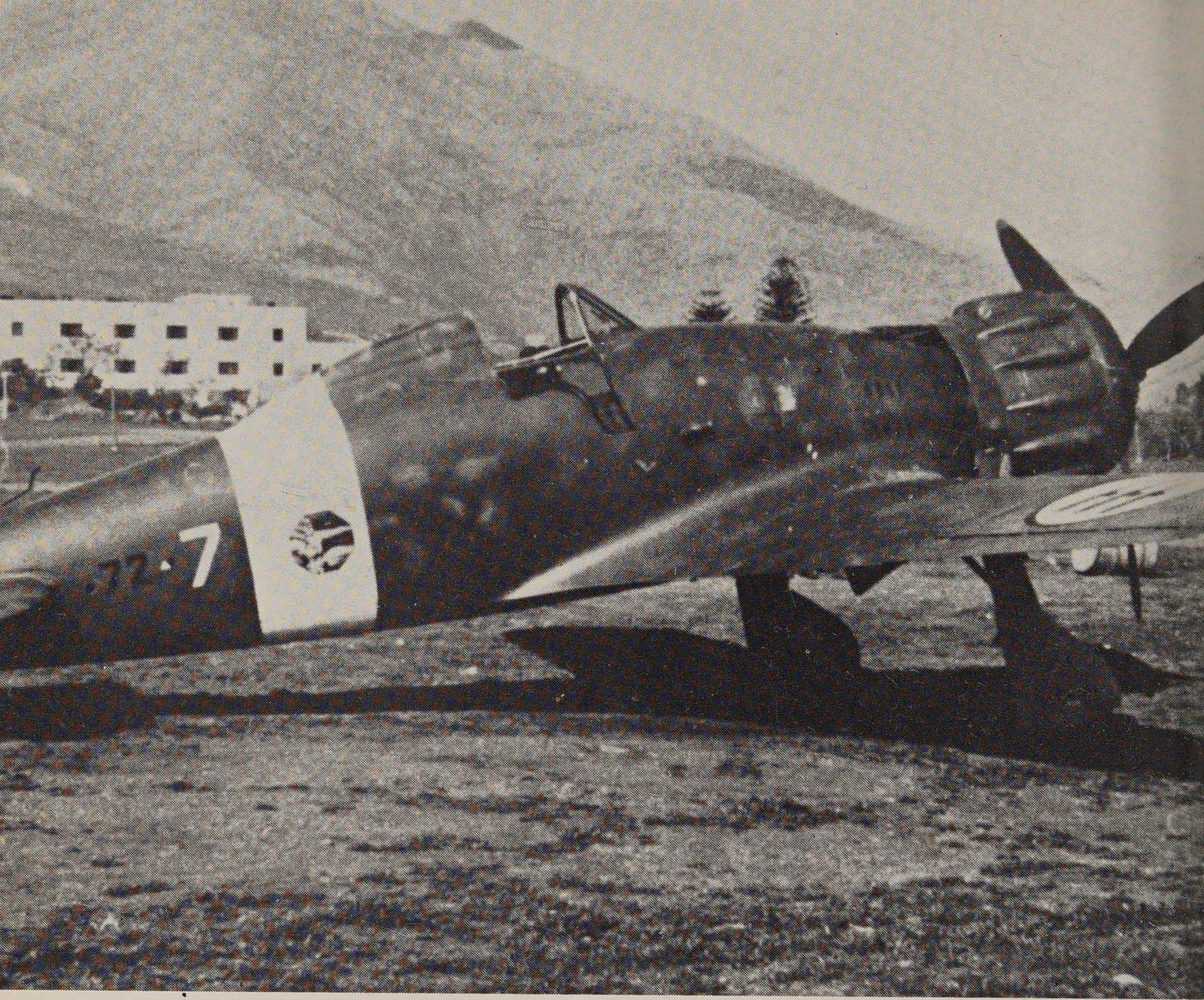
Top: Another view of three 239ª Squadriglia Ju87Bs, this time escorted by a pair of CR 42s./ *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* One of the most common air-sea rescue aircraft over the Mediterranean was the Regia Aeronautica's Red Cross-marked Cant Z506B floatplane; one of these aircraft is seen here on the water with the crew in the act of assisting some shot-down aircrew into the machine from their rubber dinghy./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*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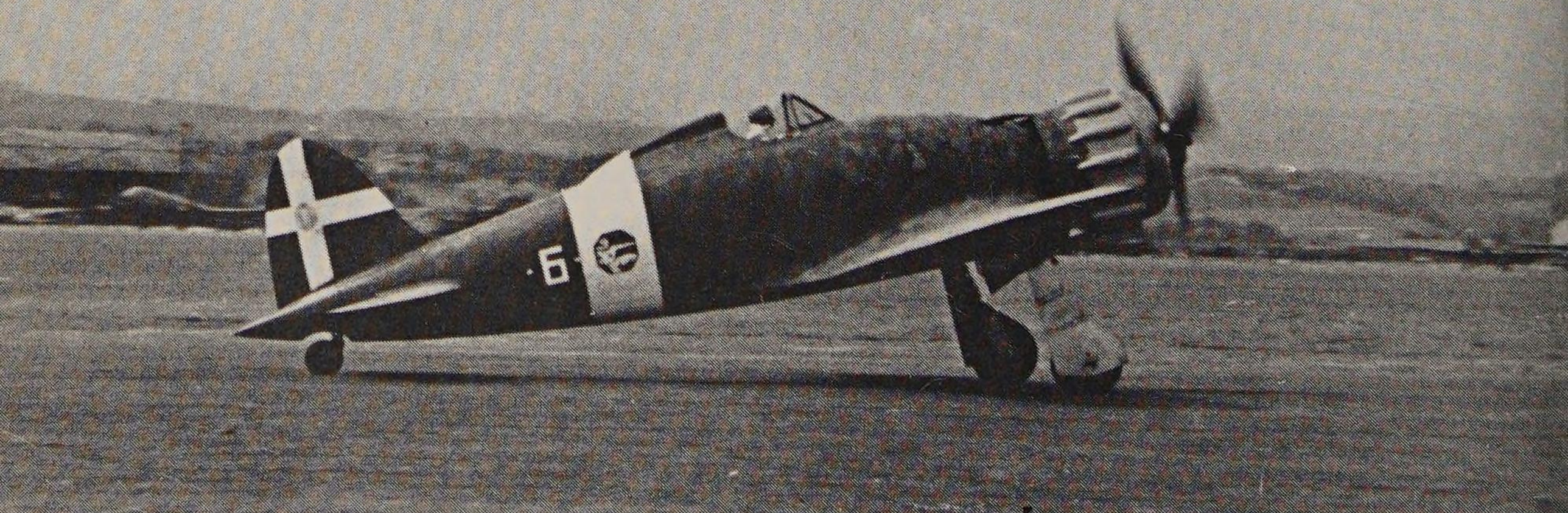
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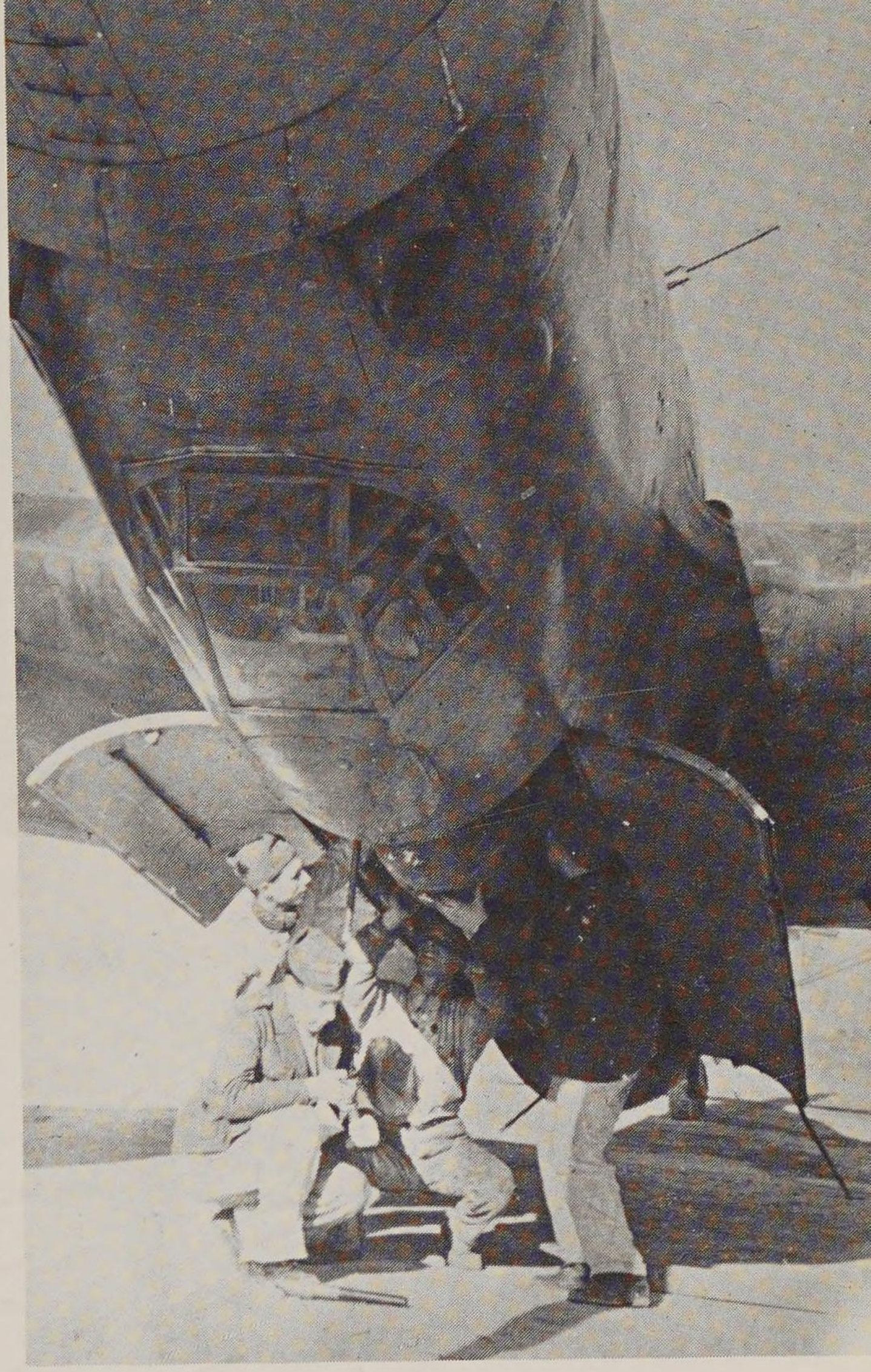
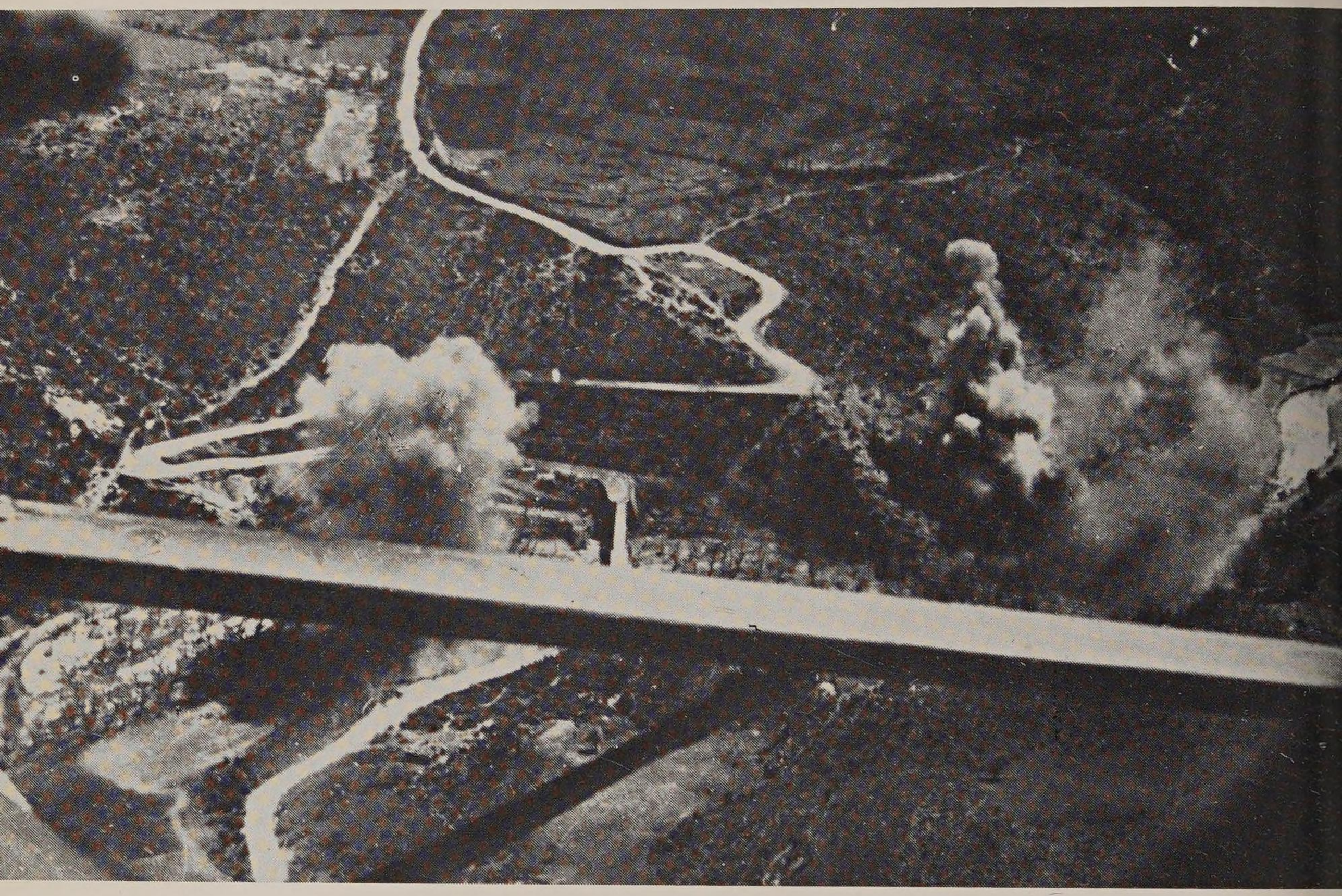
eft: Right through the summer and autumn of 941 the MC200s in Sicily carried the fight to Malta almost alone. A fighter of 72ª Squadriglia 7º Gruppo, 1º Stormo CT is seen at this time n Trapani airfield./*G. P. Borelli via G. Pini Bottom left:* A 17º Gruppo CT MC200 taxiing cross an airfield in Sicily during the summer f 1941. Among the numerous aircraft in the ackground can be seen a four-engined unkers Ju90 transport, just behind the tail nit of the fighter./*Bundesarchiv. Right:* By ate summer 1941 most bombing of Malta was eing done by Cant Z1007bis bombers. Here rmourers are making final adjustments to ombs loaded into the bomb bay of one of hese aircraft. This photograph shows well the omb-aimer's cockpit to the rear of the nose-nounted third engine./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci.Below:* Fully bombed-up, with light bombs eneath the wings in addition to the heavier rojectiles in the bomb-bay, a Z1007bis pre-ares to taxi out from its Sicilian dispersal. his aircraft is one of those built with a single in and rudder./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*



Top: Sicilian peasants watch as the Z1007bis takes off. In the background is another of these aircraft (left), this time with twin fins and rudders, and a Macchi C200 fighter (right)./ *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* A Ju88A-4 of LG 1 on Crete is readied for a mission. In the background can be seen the tails of two Bf110Cs of III/ZG 26, and the nose of a Ju52/3m. /*Bundesarchiv*

Top: Another Ju88A-4 of LG 1 on Crete, this one in much darker camouflage, taxies out for take-off. Note that this aircraft still carries yellow rudder and cowling markings, a relic of the earlier campaign over Greece and Crete./ *Bundesarchiv. Above:* At the end of 1941 the Luftwaffe returned to Sicily to renew the attack on Malta. As 1942 wore on, more units joined the attack, among them Gruppen of KG 30. A Ju88A-4 of this Geschwader is seen here on a Sicilian airfield./*Bundesarchiv*

Below: Bombs from Ju87s hammer home on targets on Malta./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*
Bottom: Late in 1941 II/JG 27 arrived in Libya from the Russian front, newly-equipped with greatly improved Messerschmitt Bf109F fighters. One of these is seen here resplendent in the Desert Sand finish applied to these new aircraft, together with a Ju88A-4 of LG 1./*Bundesarchiv*

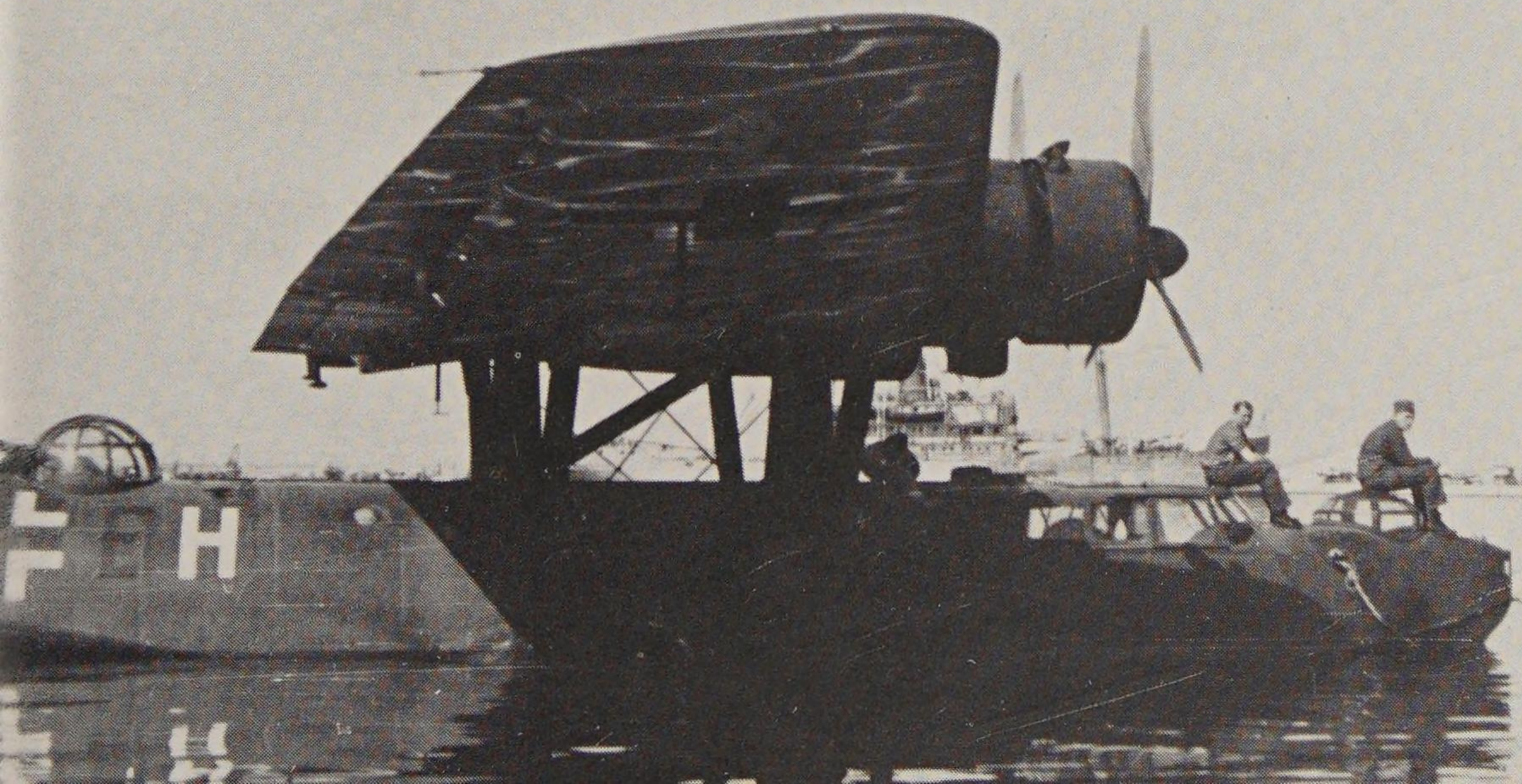


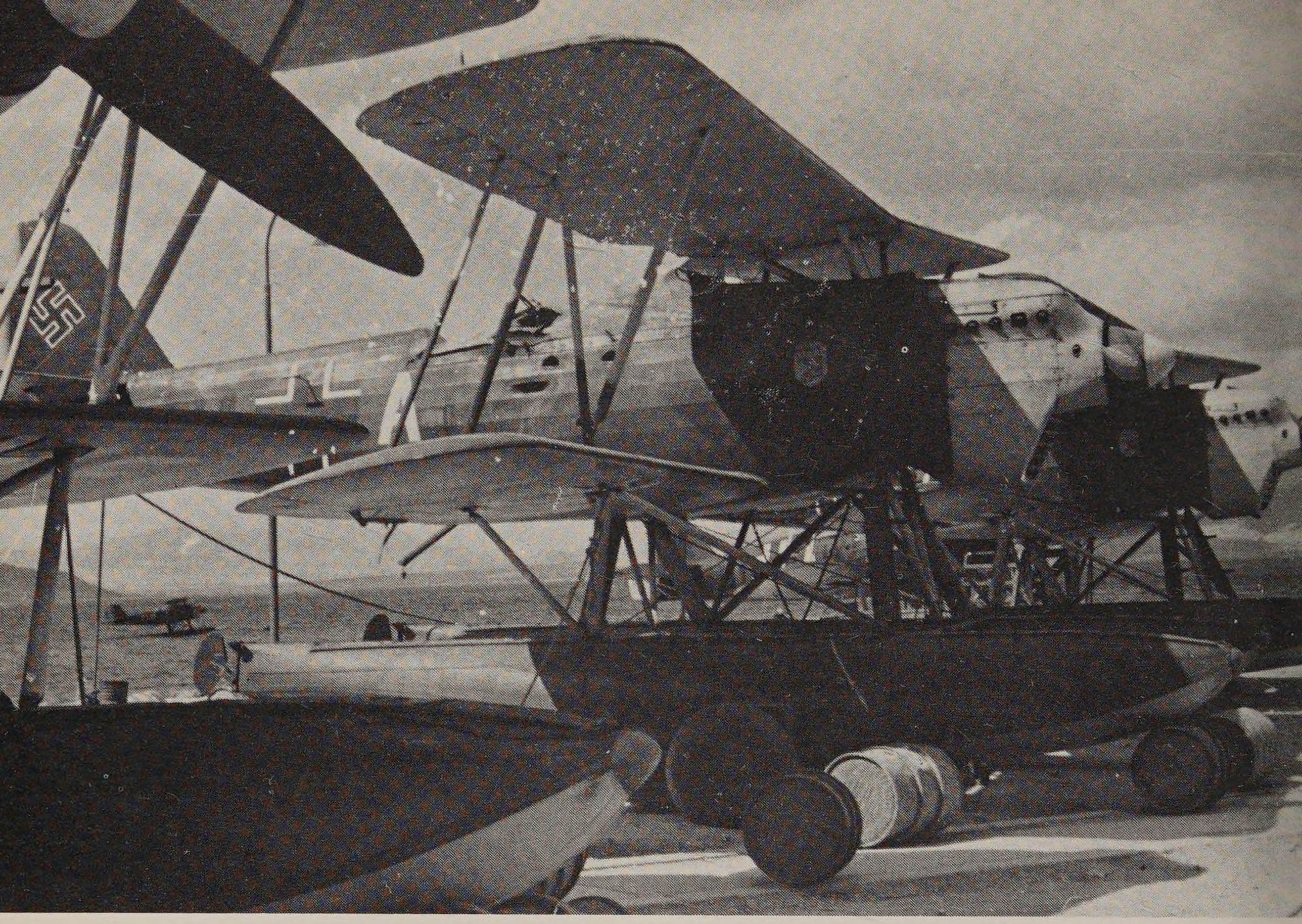
Below: I/JG 27 was not far behind II Gruppe in re-equipping with Bf109Fs, and was fully operational on these by the end of the year. One of the Gruppe's new fighters is seen here undergoing maintenance./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* A Bf109F of I/JG 27 supported on trestles, undergoes an undercarriage retraction test with the engine running. Note the use of full elevator and servicing personnel to keep the tail down. The wingtips and ailerons from this aircraft's port wing have been removed./*Bundesarchiv*

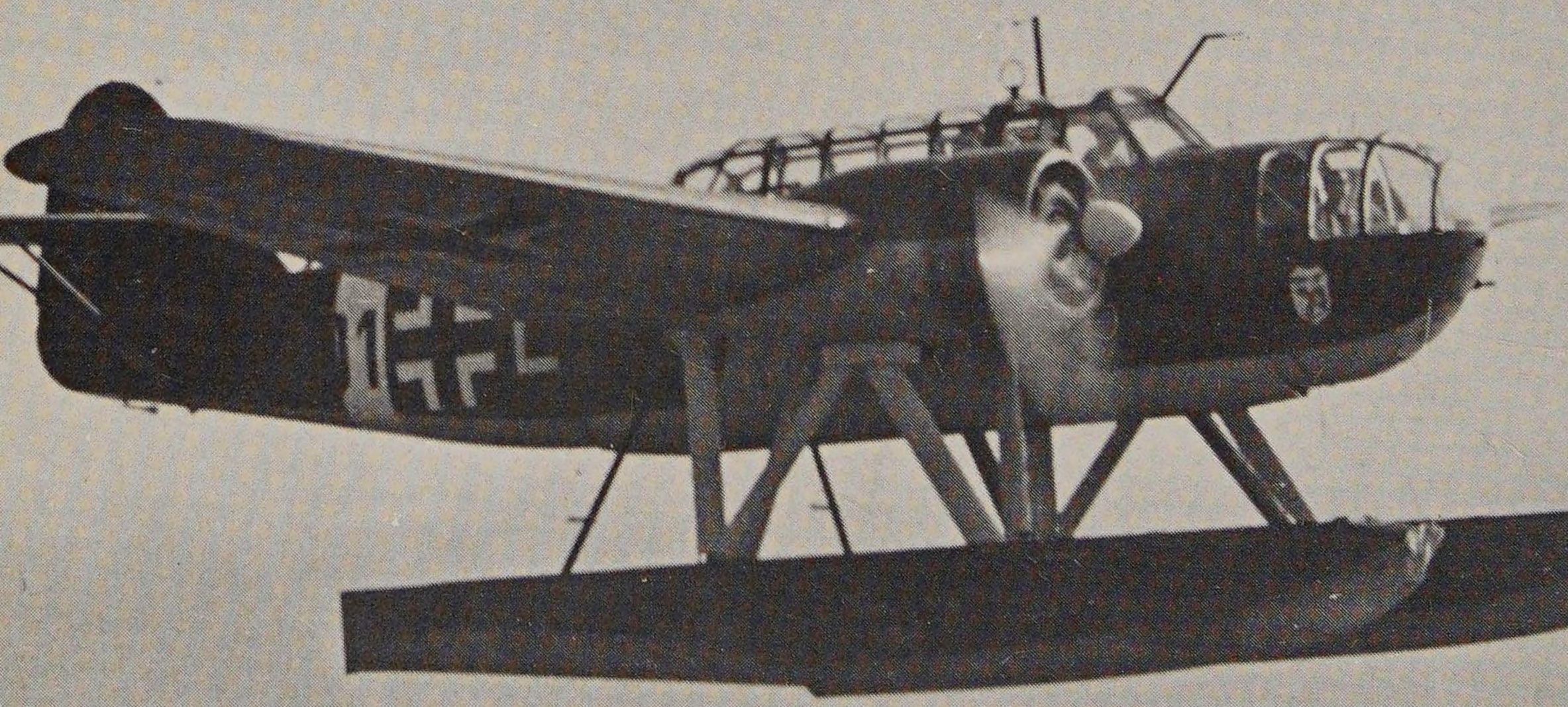
Above: III/JG 27 arrived soon after II Gruppe, reaching Libya in December 1941 to bring the whole Geschwader together in Africa. One of this Gruppe's Bf109Fs is seen here after crash-landing in British territory following a combat. Note the shell hole and other damage to the fuselage./*IWM. Top right:* An all-white Red Cross Fieseler Fi156D is seen here on a Sicilian airfield. The aircraft carries civil registration letters./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* Another Storch, this time a military liaison Fi156C, is also seen in Sicily, with the snow-clad bulk of Mount Erice in the background./*Bundesarchiv*

D-E MAW

Below: Early in 1942 Ju87Bs again operated over Malta. An aircraft of an unidentified unit is seen here flying above the Mediterranean./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* Introduced to the Mediterranean for operations over the Aegean and Ionian Seas during 1942 were a number of Arado Ar 196A-3 floatplanes. Heavily-armed and relatively fast, these little aircraft were frequently used as fighters against Allied reconnaissance and maritime patrol aircraft, and in this role they proved remarkably effective. This aircraft, 7R+GK, carries the codes and unit marking of 2/SAGr125, operating along the eastern coast of Italy./*Bundesarchiv. Top right:* 7R+GK of 2/SAGr125 shows off its wing-mounted 20mm cannon, underwing bomb-racks, and float arrangement to good advantage in this photograph. Certainly a very close piece of formation flying!/*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* Still the main Mediterranean air-sea rescue aircraft of the Luftwaffe in 1942 was the Do24. One is seen here moored in a southern Italian harbour. Note the merchant vessel and the Italian destroyer in the background. The latter is a vessel of the Soldati Class, 'Camicia Nera'./*Bundesarchiv*







Top left: A useful, if rather elderly floatplane operating in the Aegean during 1942, was the Heinkel He60C; it performed the liaison and general reconnaissance tasks amongst the plethora of Greek islands satisfactorily. Here four aircraft of 1/SAGr126 are seen ashore on the slipway, with a fifth afloat in the background. Note the yellow nose and rudder, typical of Balkans-based aircraft./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom left:* Also used in the Aegean by 1/SAGr126 were a number of these Fokker T.VIIIW bomber-reconnaissance floatplanes, captured from the Dutch in 1940./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* The licence-production of Daimler-Benz DB 601 engines in Italy finally allowed that country's aircraft industry to produce a high-performance fighter comparable with the German Bf109F and the British Spitfire, in speed and altitude, if not in armament. Here Regia Aeronautica mechanics work on such an engine installed in one of the new Macchi C202 fighters./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Right:* First unit to take the MC202 into action was 4º Stormo CT, which operated briefly over Malta in November and December 1941, before moving on to Libya. Here an Italian pilot of 91ª Squadriglia, 10º Gruppo, 4º Stormo, is seen on arrival in Africa with a pilot of the Luftwaffe. Note the well-known 'Cavallino Rampante' of 4º Stormo on the fuselage side of his aircraft./*via G. Pini*

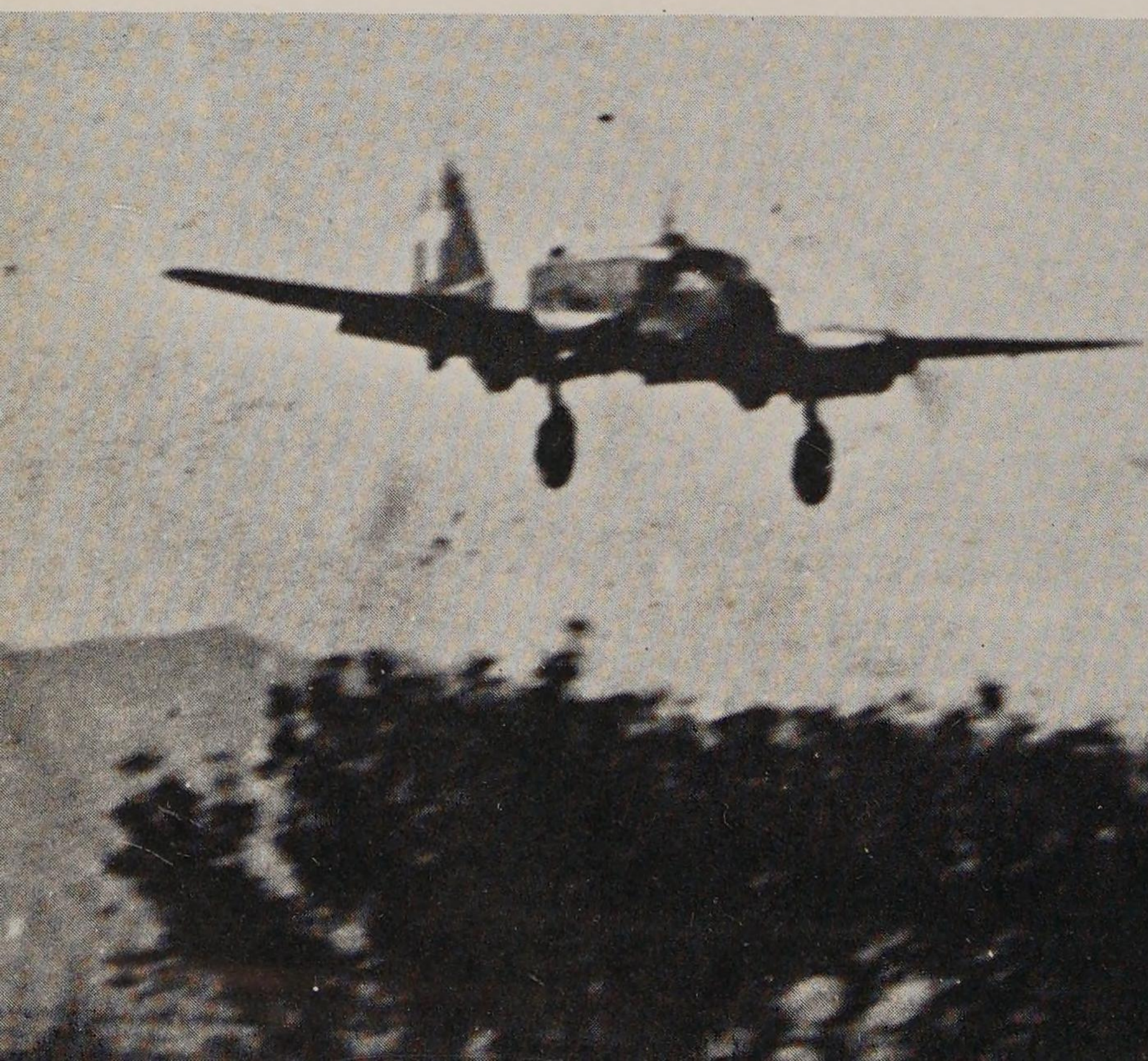
Top: Another 4° Stormo unit, 97ª Squadriglia, 9° Gruppo, on an African airfield. Note the legend '4.F.Baracca' on the nose, and the wrecked British Lysander in the background. The first MC202s had arrived in Africa in November 1941 with 1° Stormo CT, at the same time as the first Bf109Fs, but it was several weeks before they entered action there./*via G. Pini. Above:* During 1942 the SM79 became ever more important as a torpedo-dropper, operating in this role from airfields in Sardinia, Sicily and the Aegean. Here one of these aircraft is prepared for action, its torpedo already attached beneath the fuselage./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

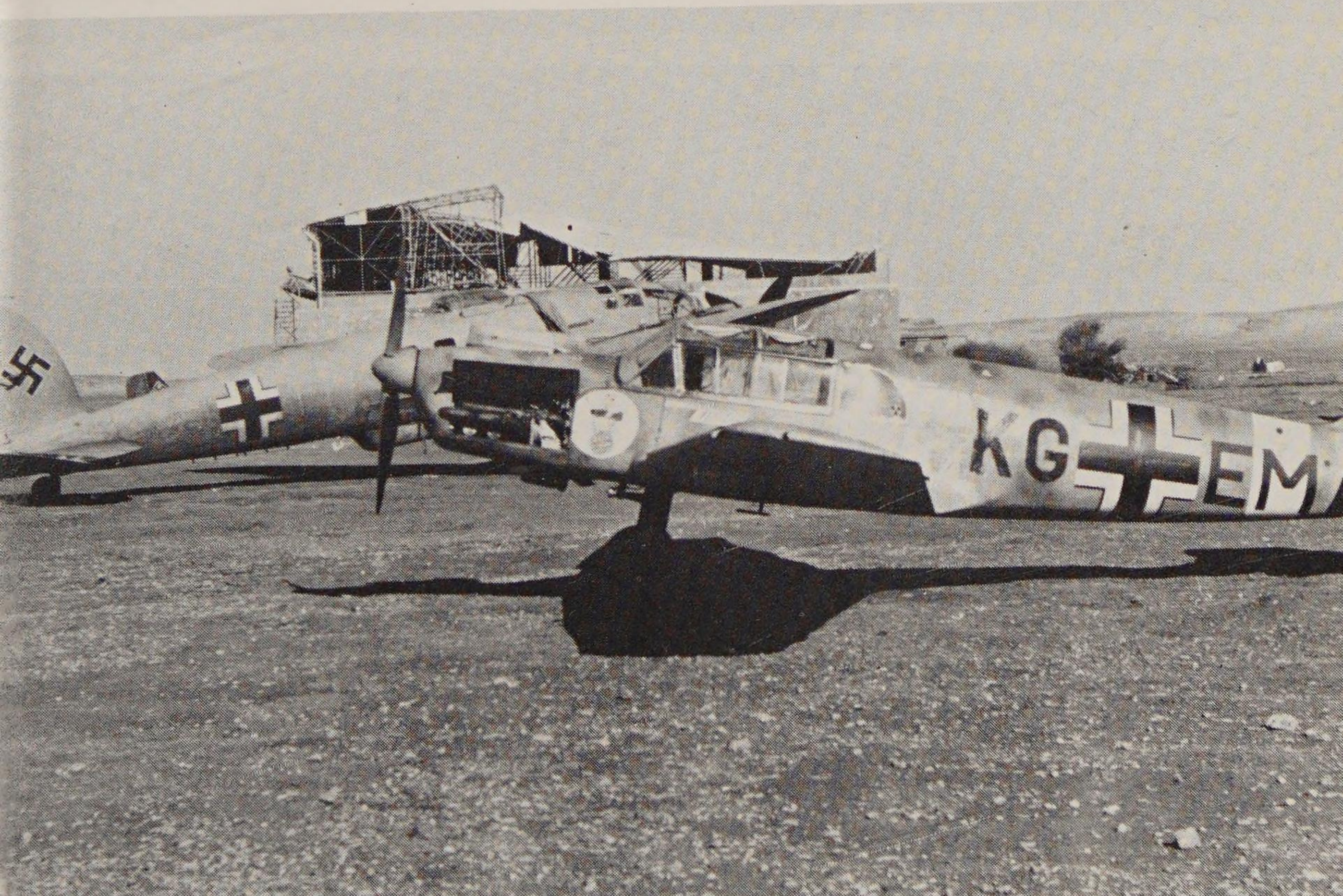
Top: Attaching an airborne torpedo to the offset crutch under the fuselage/wing root joint of an SM79./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* During the June 1942 Malta convoy an SM79 'aerosiluranti' torpedo-bomber of the Regia Aeronautica records the apparent results of its attack on the old British aircraft carrier, HMS *Argus*. The black plume is in fact exhaust smoke, *Argus* suffering no damage. A torpedo strike would have caused a column of smoke and water of far greater size than this./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Top: Successful Italian 'aerosiluranti' crew with their SM79sil aircraft. The pilot clad in white overalls is Tenente Petrosellini./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* Despite the arrival of the MC202, the MC200 soldiered on in many units. Over Malta these fighters were operated in 1942 by 16° Gruppo CT among other units; one aircraft of this Gruppo's 169ª Squadriglia is seen here on a Sicilian airfield./*G. P. Borelli via G. Pini*

Top: Throughout 1942 Regia Aeronautica fighter units re-equipped with MC202s as fast as production allowed. 16º Gruppo CT was amongst those converting, and here one of the new aircraft of this unit's 167ª Squadriglia is seen with its proud pilot in Sicily./*G. P. Borelli via G. Pini. Above:* During 1942 a handful of Reggiane Re2000 fighters served in Sicily for the defence of the port of Palermo on the island's north-west coast. Equipping 377ª Squadriglia, they were to see no action during their short period of service. Two of them are seen here on Trapani/Milo airfield./*Bundesarchiv*

Left: Close-up of a 377ª Squadriglia Re2000 in Sicily; note that the aircraft has a small unit marking painted on the fuselage ahead of the white band. This is an inverted triangle on which is painted a crescent moon with an owl, armed with a blunderbuss, perched upon it. This marking was later to be seen, considerably enlarged, on CR42s operating from the island./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* Entering service during 1942 in increasing numbers to supplement or replace the Ro37s and Ca311s in the reconnaissance and army co-operation squadriglie, was the Caproni Ca314 light bomber-reconnaissance aircraft, one of which is seen here coming in to land./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci.Right:* An Italian mechanic at work on the wing of a Caproni Ca314./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom right:* With increasing Allied activity in the Mediterranean area in 1942, the strategically well-placed island of Sardinia became of greater importance, and units of the Luftwaffe began operating from its airfields alongside the Italians. Here a transport He111 and a Messerschmitt Bf108 'Taifun' liaison aircraft, KG+EM, are seen on Cagliari airfield. The fin and rudder of a Ju52/3m can just be seen behind the Heinkel./*Bundesarchiv*

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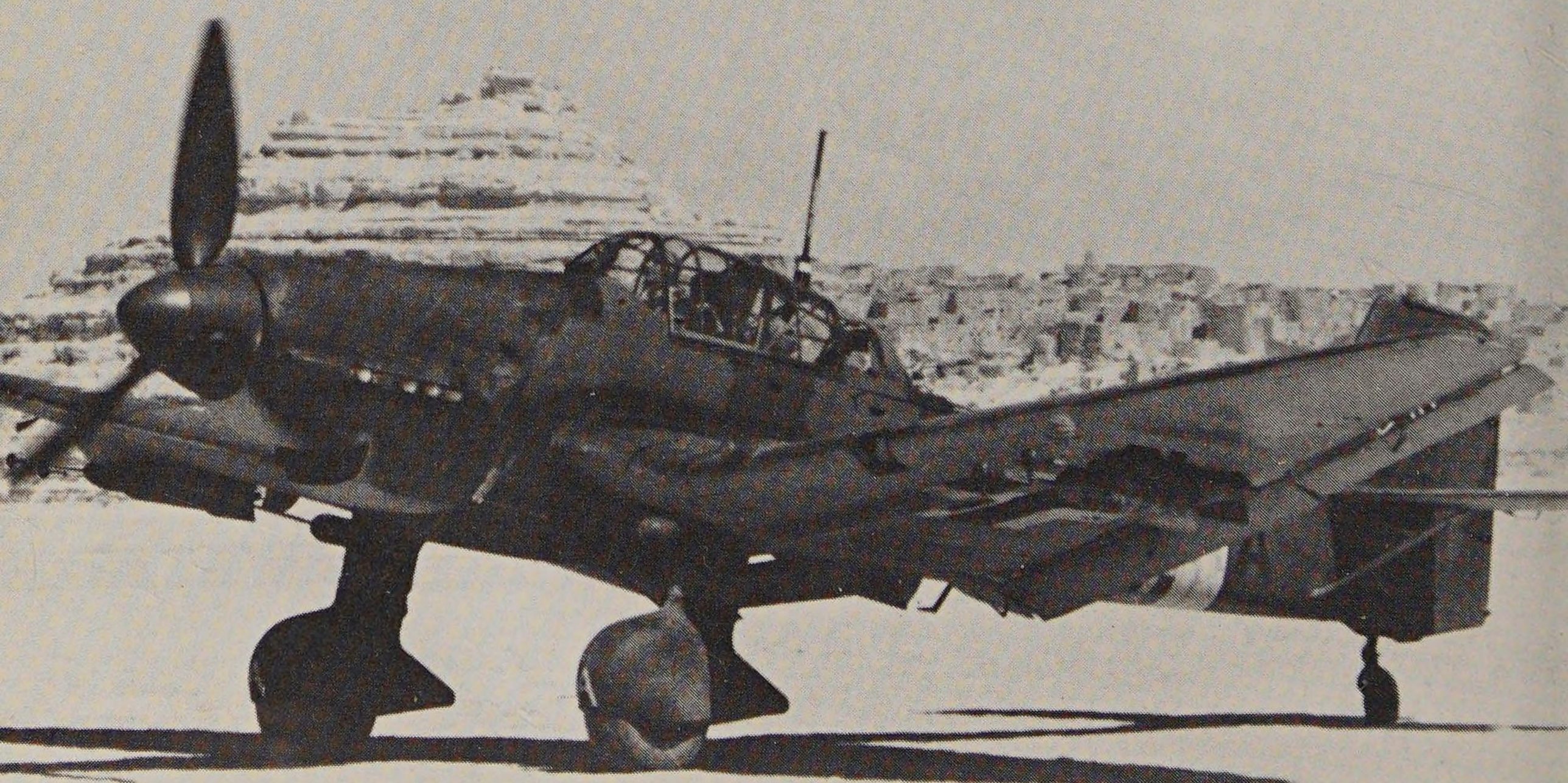
Below : Red Cross Ju52/3m on a Mediterranean airfield./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom :* Caproni Ca164 basic trainer of the Regia Aeronautica, serving in Italy with 202ª Squadriglia./*via G. Pini*

Below : Losses of shipping to British submarines and aircraft operating from Malta led to the despatch to the Mediterranean of ever-growing numbers of transport aircraft to fly in fuel and vital supplies for the Afrika Korps and Fliegerführer Afrika. Ju52/3ms flew many sorties of this kind between Crete and North Africa during 1942, always in danger of interception by long-range fighters from Egypt./*Bundesarchiv*
Bottom : LG 1 Ju88A-4s, operating from Crete, gained many successes against Allied shipping in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean during 1942./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: After a period of service in North Africa throughout the first half of 1942, 17º Gruppo CT moved to Pantelleria to escort torpedo-bombers on anti-shipping strikes. Here MC202s of the Gruppo's 80ª Squadriglia are seen on the edge of an airfield with SM79sil. 'aerosiluranti' aircraft in the background./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* The MC 202s of 153º Gruppo CT operated over Malta during summer 1942, flying from airfields in Sicily. This aircraft of 374ª Squadriglia is seen over that island in flight./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Top: In Africa the MC200 remained in service in appreciable numbers throughout 1942, though as the year wore on more and more were relegated to the fighter-bomber role. Here one such fighter prepares for take-off, an SM82 transport in the background./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* Another unit operating over Malta in summer 1942 was 155° Gruppo, 51° Stormo CT. Here an MC202 of 378ª Squadriglia is seen crash-landed on Gozo Island, close to Malta, after being shot down by the great Canadian 'ace' FgOff G. F. 'Screwball' Beurling./*IWM*

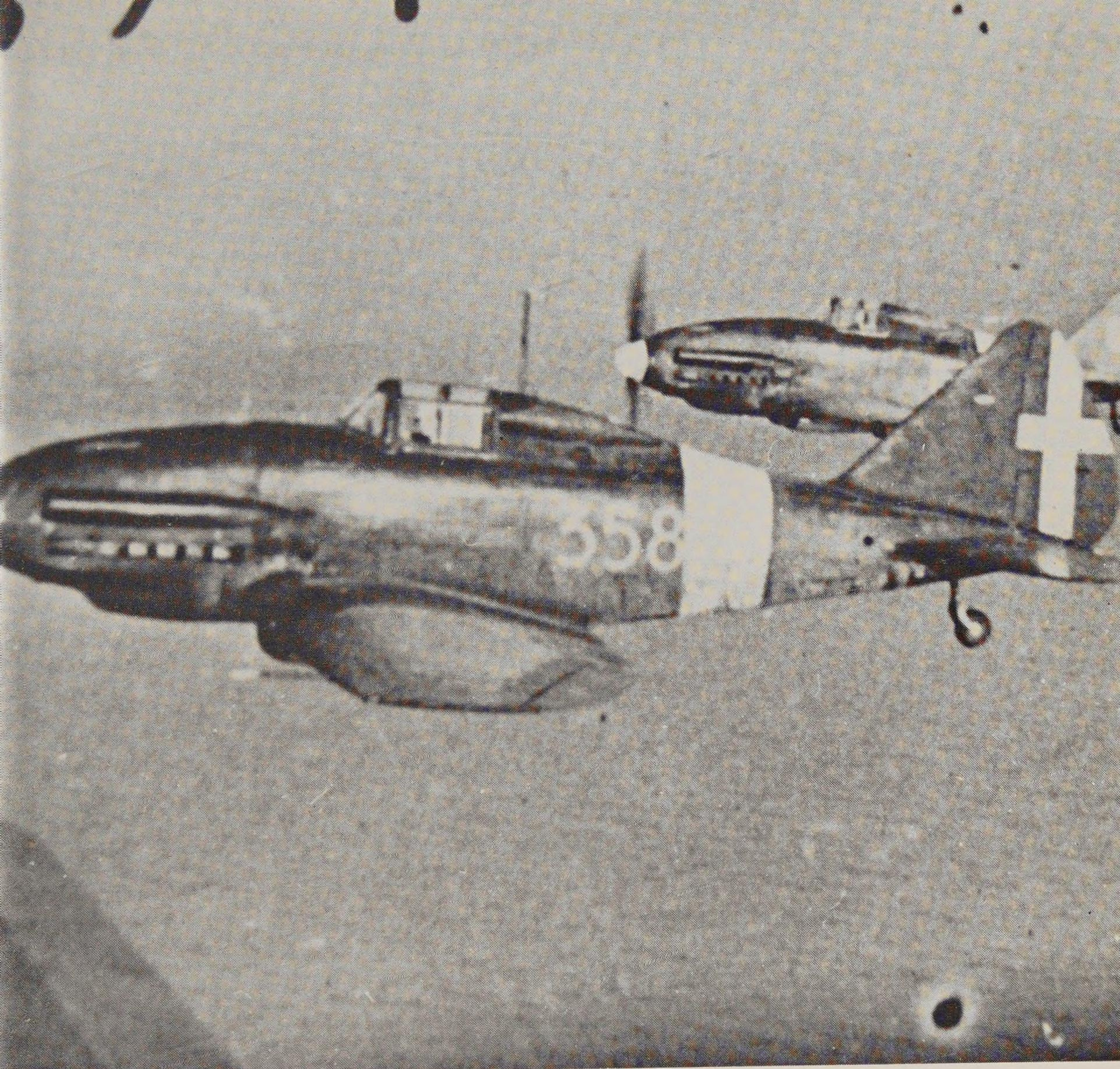
Below: The first of the Ju87D 'Stukas' arrived in the Mediterranean in April 1942, operating initially over Malta. They then began to trickle into North Africa in small numbers. Here a fully bombed-up aircraft of I/StG3 is seen in flight over the Desert; note the Gruppe's diving bird insignia on the nose./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* Ju87D-1Trop, flown by Hpt Walter Sigel, Kommodore of StG.3, seen here on Derna airfield in summer 1942. Hpt Sigel commanded 'Gefechtsverband Sigel', a composite force of Ju87s, Ju88Cs and Bf110s, which took a major part in the successful assault on Tobruk during July./*Bundesarchiv*

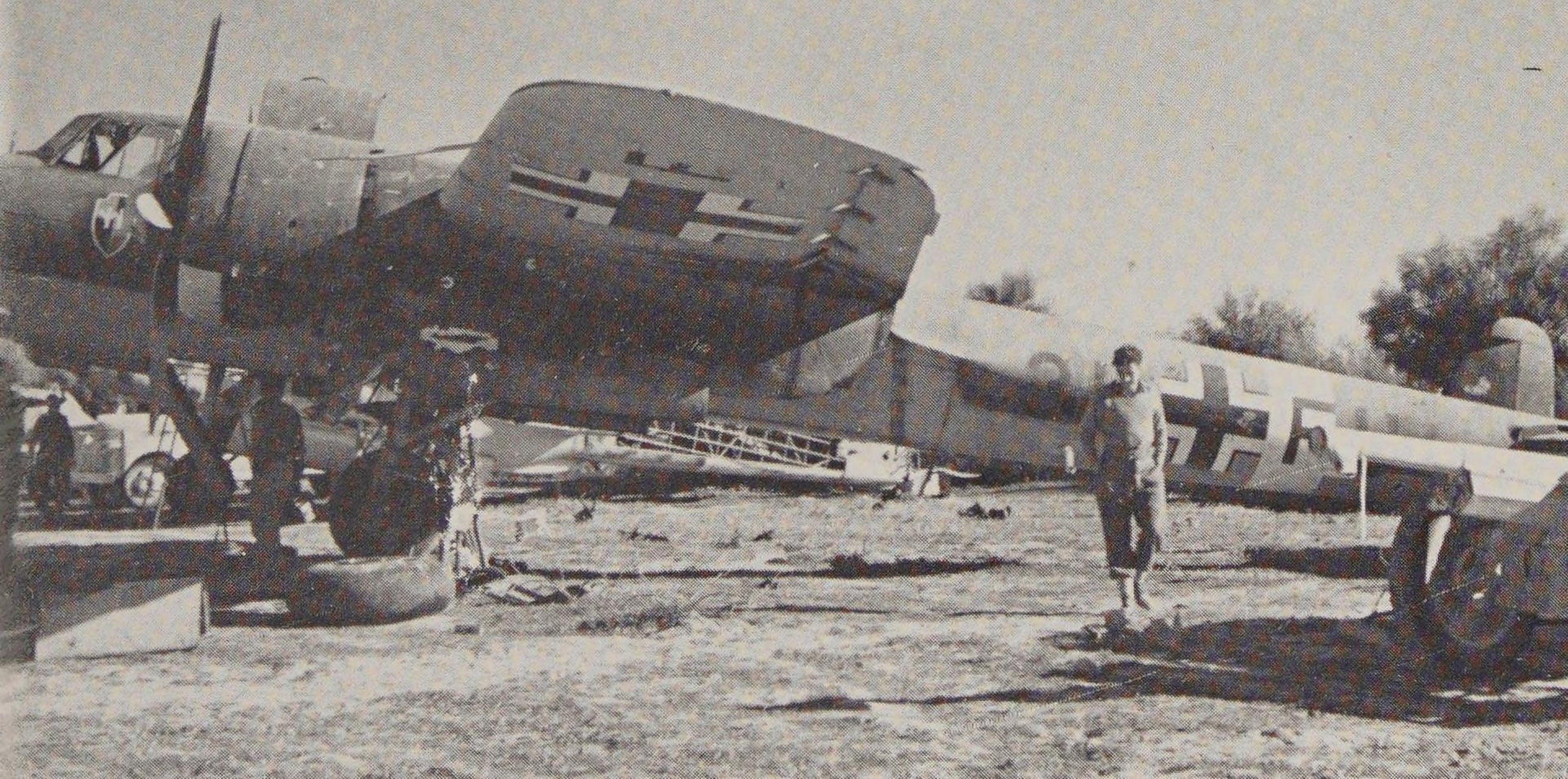


Below: In Africa Luftwaffe fighter pilots enjoyed some of their greatest successes of the war against British fighters, several pilots running up tremendous scores in a relatively short time. This group, seen here at Appollonia, Libya, include the three most successful pilots of the desert campaigns. Left to right Lt Kügelbauer (I/JG 27), Hpt Hans-Joachim Marseille (I/JG 27, and with 158 victories, 151 of them in Africa, the most successful German pilot of the war against the British), Oblt Werner Schroer (III/JG 27, 61 victories in Africa), and Lt Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt (I/JG 27, 59 victories in Africa). Of the three high-scorers, only Schroer survived the campaign./*H. Ring. Bottom:* A scourge of the Axis airfields in Africa were the sabotage commandos of the Special Air Services, who attacked airfields far behind the lines at night, destroying many aircraft. Here Luftwaffe personnel inspect and test one of the SAS's armed jeeps, which has been captured during one such raid./ *Bundesarchiv*

Left: I/KG 77, operating over the Mediterranean, celebrate the one hundredth sinking of an Allied vessel. The fortunate pilot of this Ju88A-4 has received a victor's laurel wreath, a special certificate and a bottle of champagne to mark the occasion. Note from the rudder of his aircraft that he has already achieved considerable success in the anti-shipping role. The crew of this aircraft has also claimed one aerial victory; note the victory bar on the fin by the rudder hinge./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* Another Ju88 unit achieving success against shipping targets in the Mediterranean during the late summer of 1942 was III/KG 30. Here 4D+MR of this Gruppe's 7 Staffel shows its record on its fin. This pilot has claimed hits on a number of warships./*Bundesarchiv. Top right:* A second DB-601-powered fighter entered service with the Regia Aeronautica during 1942, although it was never to achieve the widespread use of its contemporary, the MC202. The Reggianne Re2001 began operations over Malta in the spring of 1942, and two gruppi of these aircraft were to fly regularly over the island throughout the summer and autumn. One of the aircraft is seen here being refuelled on an airfield in Sardinia, while operating from that island during the June 1942 Malta convoy battles./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom right:* Servicing the equipment of a Re2001 Ariete of 369ª Squadriglia, 22º Gruppo CT on Sicily./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Top right: A pair of Re2001s of 2º Gruppo CT in flight. The nearest aircraft is from 358ª Squadriglia, while that in the background is from 152ª Squadriglia, and carries the Gruppo's 'Galletto' emblem on the fin./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* Unusual victory tallies favoured by a Regia Aeronautica pilot for marking on the fin of his North African-based MC202. This is believed to be the 3º Stormo CT aircraft of Ten. Franco Bordoni-Bisleri, most successful Italian pilot of the desert campaigns./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* By late 1942 10/ZG 26 had exchanged its Bf110s for a mixed bag of Ju88Cs and Do17Zs. One of the latter is seen here abandoned on Castel Benito airfield following the Axis retreat from Libya./*IWM*



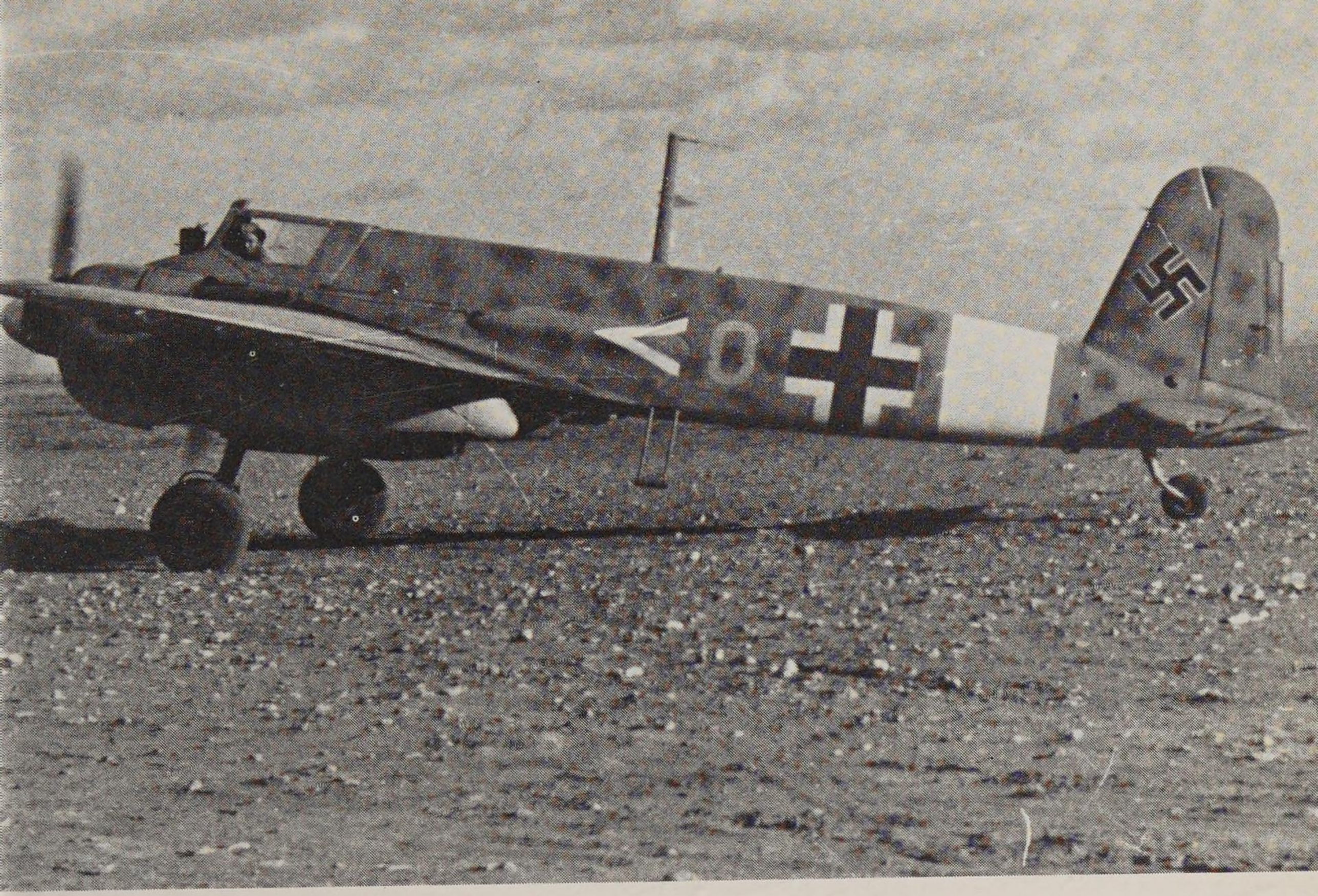


Top: Raids by British based-night bombers of RAF Bomber Command on targets in Italy's industrial north led to the formation of two night fighter gruppi, 59° and 60°. Initial equipment was modified CR42CN aircraft, and one of these of 300ª Squadriglia is seen with its engine running as the pilot prepares for a nocturnal sortie. / *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*
Above: Fiat CR42CN night fighters of 300ª Squadriglia at dispersal. / *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

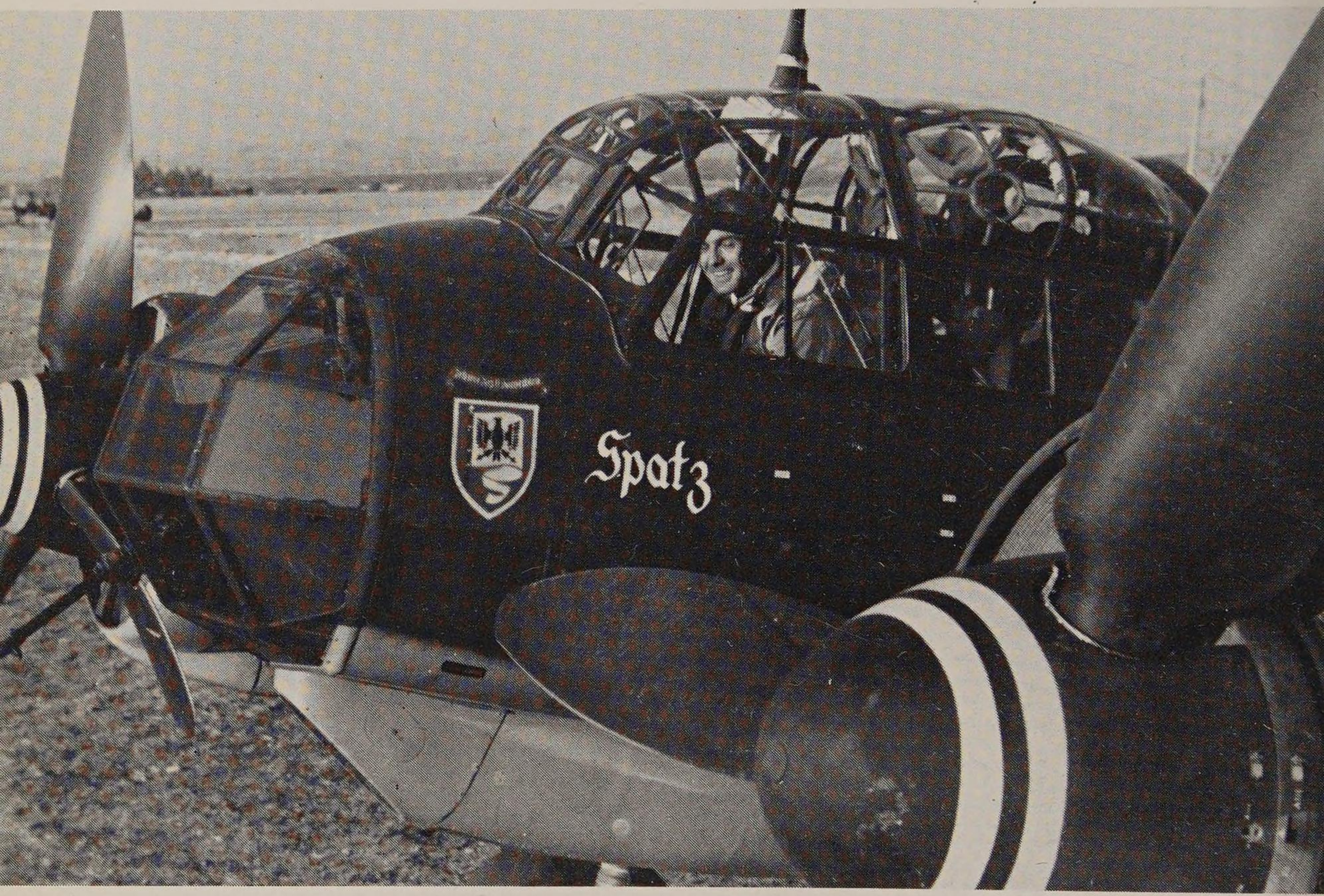
Below: Gotha Go242 transport gliders were being pressed into service in the Mediterranean late in 1942 in a further effort to ease the critical supply situation of the Axis forces in Africa. One of these aircraft, TD+IU, is seen here at a Sicilian airfield./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* Another glider used widely by the Luftwaffe during World War II was the small DFS 230B-1, one of which is seen on Comiso airfield, Sicily. The attractive piece of nose art is unidentified as a unit marking, and is probably an individual emblem. Note the Bf108 Taifun, which can just be seen in the background, beneath the port wing./*Bundesarchiv*

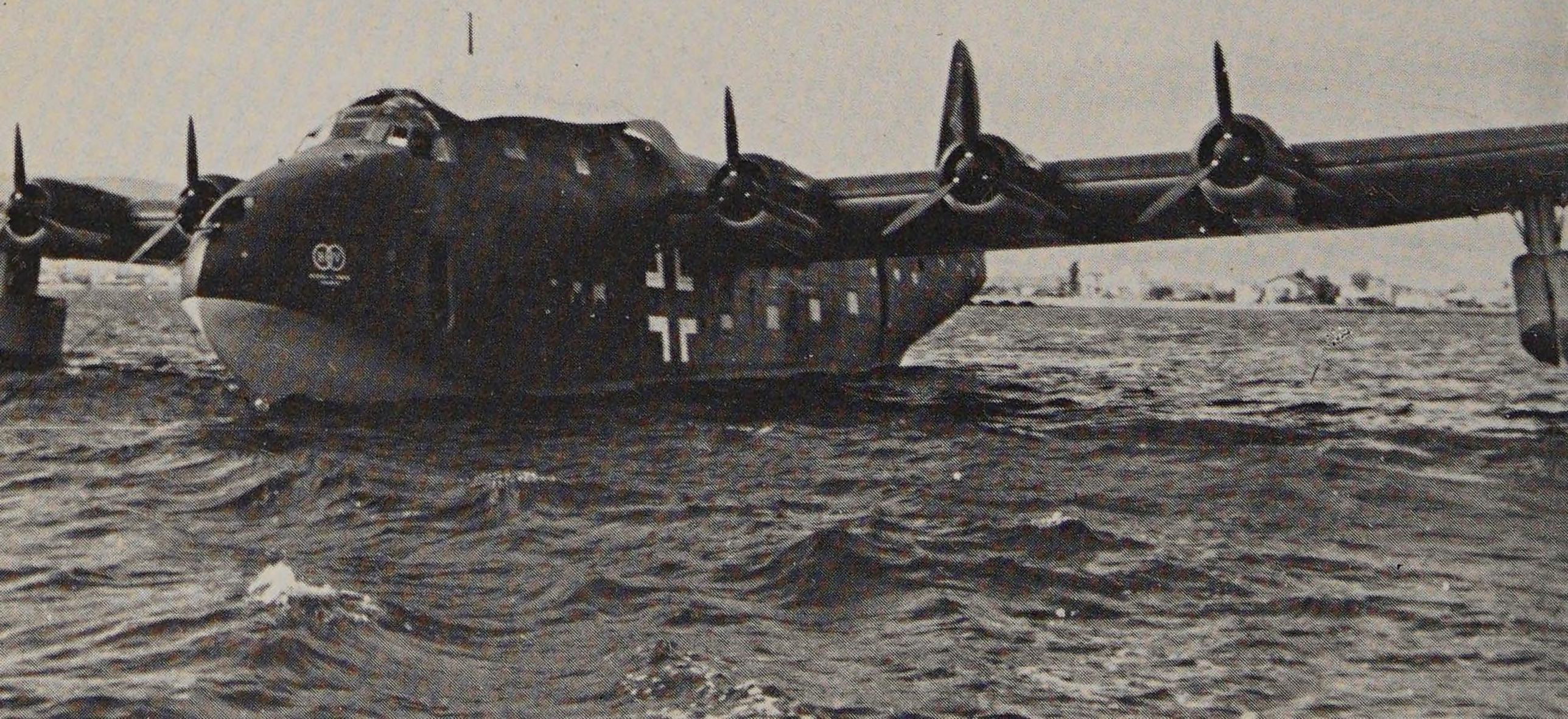
Above: Ten Re2000 III—Serie fighters were delivered to the Italian Navy in 1942, fitted for catapult launching. Equipping 1ª Squadriglia Forze Navali, they were issued to several Italian capital ships, but in the event, since the fleet did not put to sea, the catapult Re2000s saw no action./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Top right: In November 1942, as the Afrika Korps was in full flight from El Alamein, 4/SG 2 arrived in Libya with some of the first Henschel Hs129B-1 'tank-busters' to enter service. The engines proved unreliable and very susceptible to desert dust, and operations by this unit were swiftly curtailed. Note the aircraft's fighter-type markings./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* On November 8th 1942 Anglo-American forces invaded French North Africa. Some of the first Luftwaffe aircraft to be despatched hurriedly to Tunisia to forestall an Allied take-over of that country, were Bf109Fs of JG 53 from Sicily. One of these aircraft is seen on arrival, being serviced, while two young NCO pilots seated on a long-range fuel tank, enjoy local Cap Bon grapes./*Bundesarchiv*

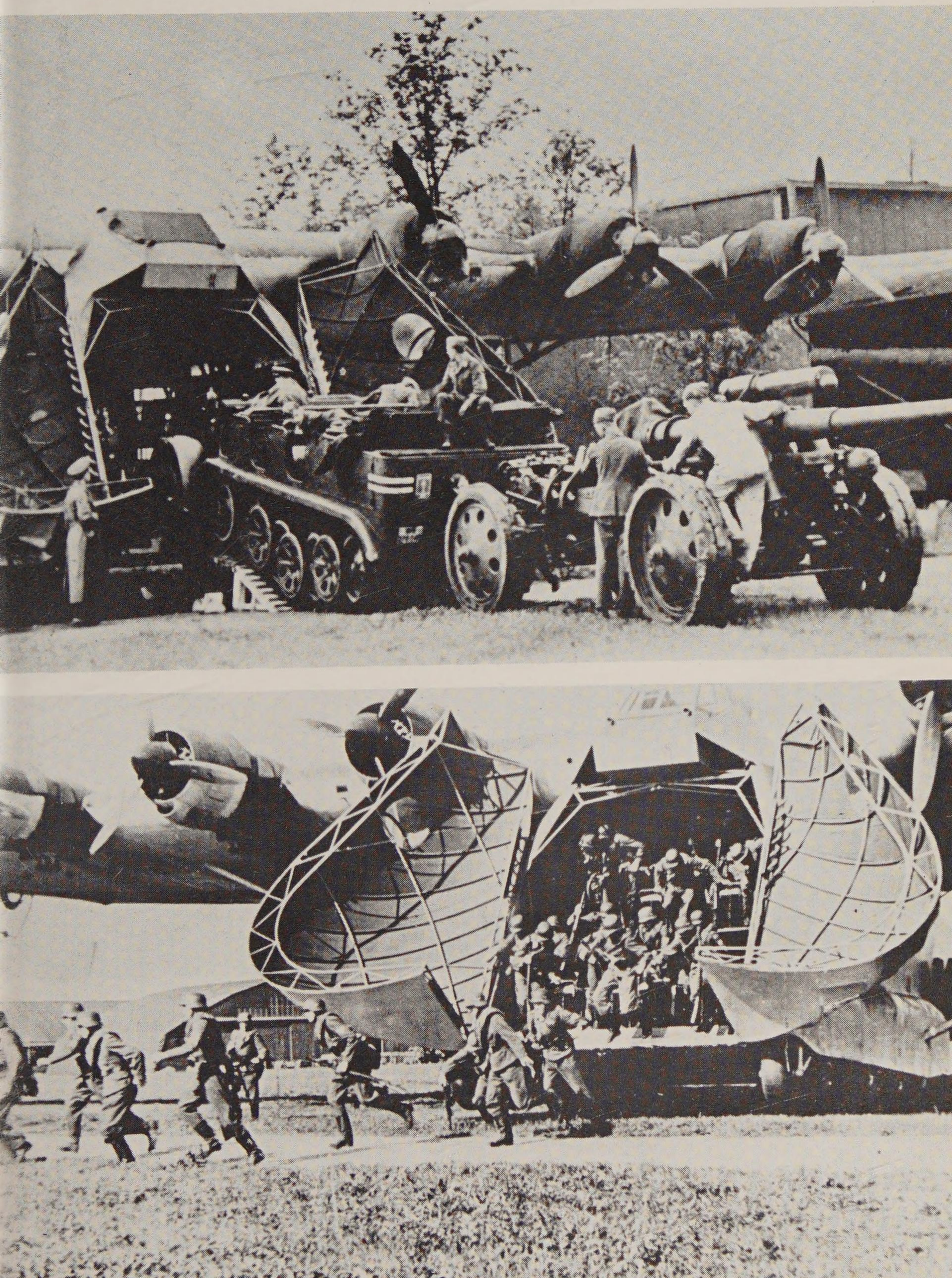


Below: Available for immediate action against the Allied forces in Algeria were the Gruppen of Ju88s which had recently been attacking Malta. Here one such bomber of KG 77 displays its nose art./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* To assist in ferrying troops and supplies from Sicily to Tunisia and Libya, Lufttransportstaffel 222See arrived in the Mediterranean, equipped with all the Blohm und Voss Bv222 six-engined flyingboats that had been built so far, including the production prototypes. One of these massive aircraft is seen here at anchor off the coast./*Bundesarchiv*



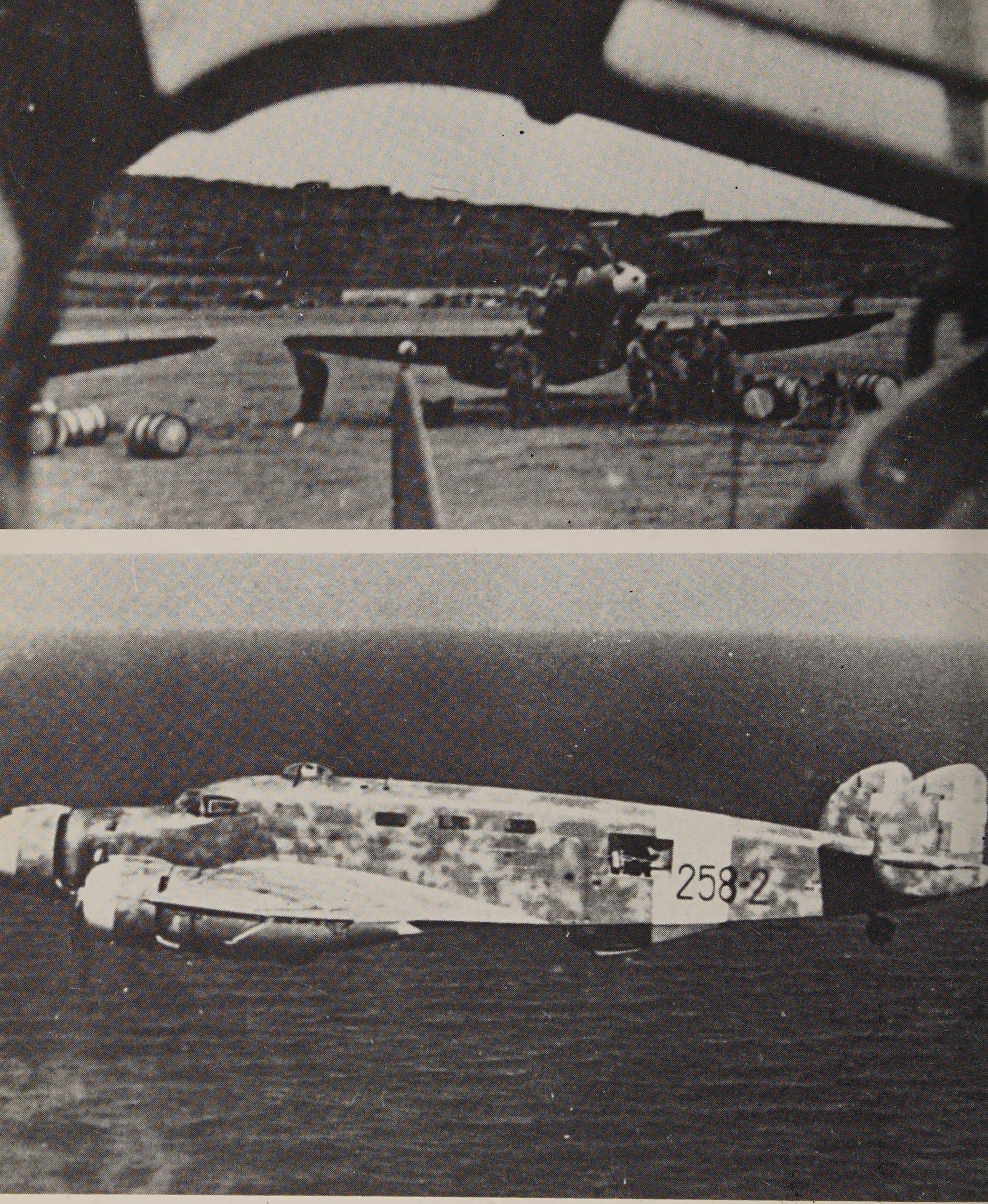


Below: Another giant aircraft type to be rushed to Sicily was the Messerschmitt Me323 'powered glider', an enormous transport aircraft initially designed as a glider, and subsequently fitted with six French Gnome-Rhone engines. A half-track towing a field gun and limber enters the capacious fuselage of one of these aircraft to make the flight to Africa./*H. Schliephake via A. Price. Bottom:* On arrival at Tunis an Me323 disgorges a host of Wehrmacht infantrymen. Note the multi-wheel undercarriage; the troops provide a good idea of the enormous size of this aircraft./*H. Schliephake via A. Price*



Top: Bf109Fs of III/JG 53 undertake the short flight across the neck of sea from Sicily to Tunisia. The nearest aircraft is known to be flown by one of the Luftwaffe's 'Experten', and is believed to be the mount of Lt Jürgen Harder, Staffelkapitän of 7/JG 53./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* The pilot of a Macchi C202 of 168ª Squadriglia, 16º Gruppo CT has a final word with his mechanic before take-off from a landing ground in Southern Tunisia. 16º Gruppo operated in Africa up to the last days of Axis resistance there./*via G. Pini*

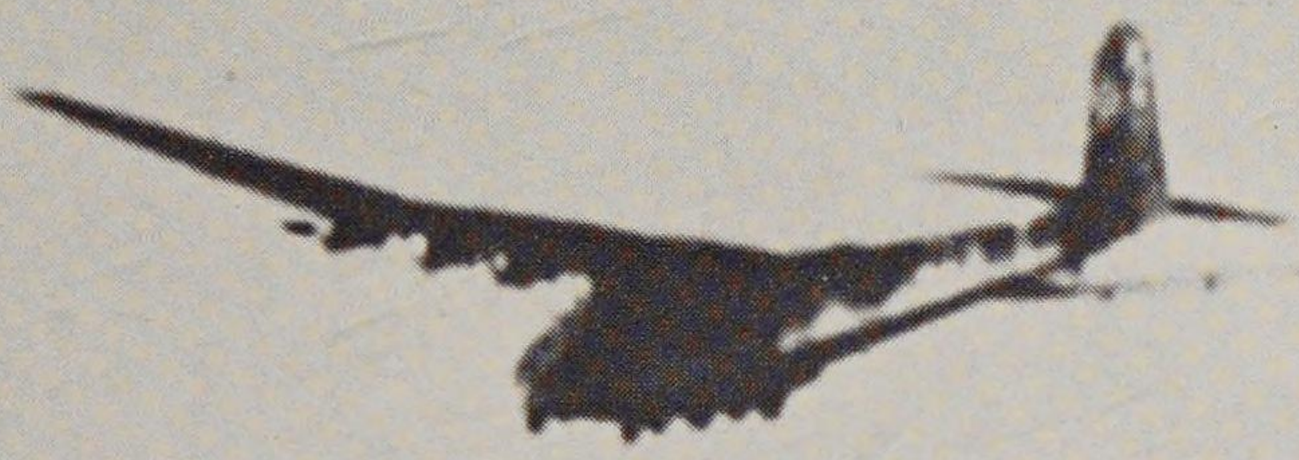
Top: LG 1 remained active over the Mediterranean throughout the whole of 1942 and 1943, operating mainly from Crete. Here one of its Ju88A-4s displays the undersurface of the wing camouflaged for night operations./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* Throughout the second half of 1942 CR42 fighter-bombers were very active in North Africa, operating with the Stormi Assalto. Here several bomb-laden aircraft are seen ready for a mission over the front. Early in 1943, after the Axis retreat into Southern Tunisia, the remaining CR42s were flown back to Sicily, but here a number of them remained in first line service, pending the availability of more modern types./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*



Top: Immediately following the Allied landings in French North Africa, Re2001s were very active, flying from Pantelleria to make fighter-bomber attacks on the ports of Bone and Bougie. A pair of these aircraft on the island are being readied for action./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Above:* A new Italian bomber which saw its first large-scale operational use during the Tunisian campaign, was the Savoia SM84, employed like its predecessor, the SM79, both as a level bomber and a torpedo-dropper. One of these aircraft of 258ª Squadriglia is seen here in flight over the sea./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Top: Cant Z1007bis bombers were extremely active at night over Northern Tunisia and Algeria, operating from airfields in Sardinia and Sicily during early 1943./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci.Above:* During December 1942 274ª Squadriglia BGR moved to Sardinia, equipped with the first Italian four-engined bomber, the Piaggio P108B. The unit's aircraft operated by night for some weeks over North Africa, before returning to Italy for manufacturer's overhaul. Only the one squadriglia of these aircraft was to see first line service./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Left: Another photograph of a 274ª Squadriglia BGR P108B bomber, showing the bombardier's position and forward defensive armament./ *Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Bottom left:* Apart from considerable service in East Africa as a bomber-transport, the Caproni Ca133 was generally used as a transport and unit 'hack' aircraft. Here one of these aircraft in use as a Red Cross airborne ambulance is seen on a Tunisian airfield./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* Me323 transport in flight over the Mediterranean. This photograph was taken from a patrolling RAF Martin Marauder bomber of 14 Squadron, which subsequently attacked and shot down the German aircraft near Sardinia./*IWM. Bottom:* Fiat CR42s carrying the crescent moon and owl marking previously carried by the Re2000s of 377ª Squadriglia. These aircraft are believed to be serving with either 576ª Squadriglia in Sicily, or 370ª Squadriglia in Sardinia. To the left of these aircraft the nose and rudder of a pair of Re2001s can be seen./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*



Below: Fiat G-50bis fighter-bomber of 395ª Squadriglia, 154° Gruppo Autonomo, in flight over Southern Italy in early 1943./*Bundesarchiv Bottom:* Close up of one of the CR42s, showing clearly the unit marking carried by them. This has not been previously illustrated in an English-language publication./*Bundesarchiv*

Right: CR 42CN indicates its night fighting role by the legend on its engine cowling. Its translation is 'At night I can't sleep any more.,/*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* Not Fiat G-50s, but Caproni-Vizzola F5s, which served with a night fighter gruppo based at Ciampino airfield, Rome, under 3ª Squadra Aerea control./*via C. Ricci*

"Io la notte più non posso dormire"

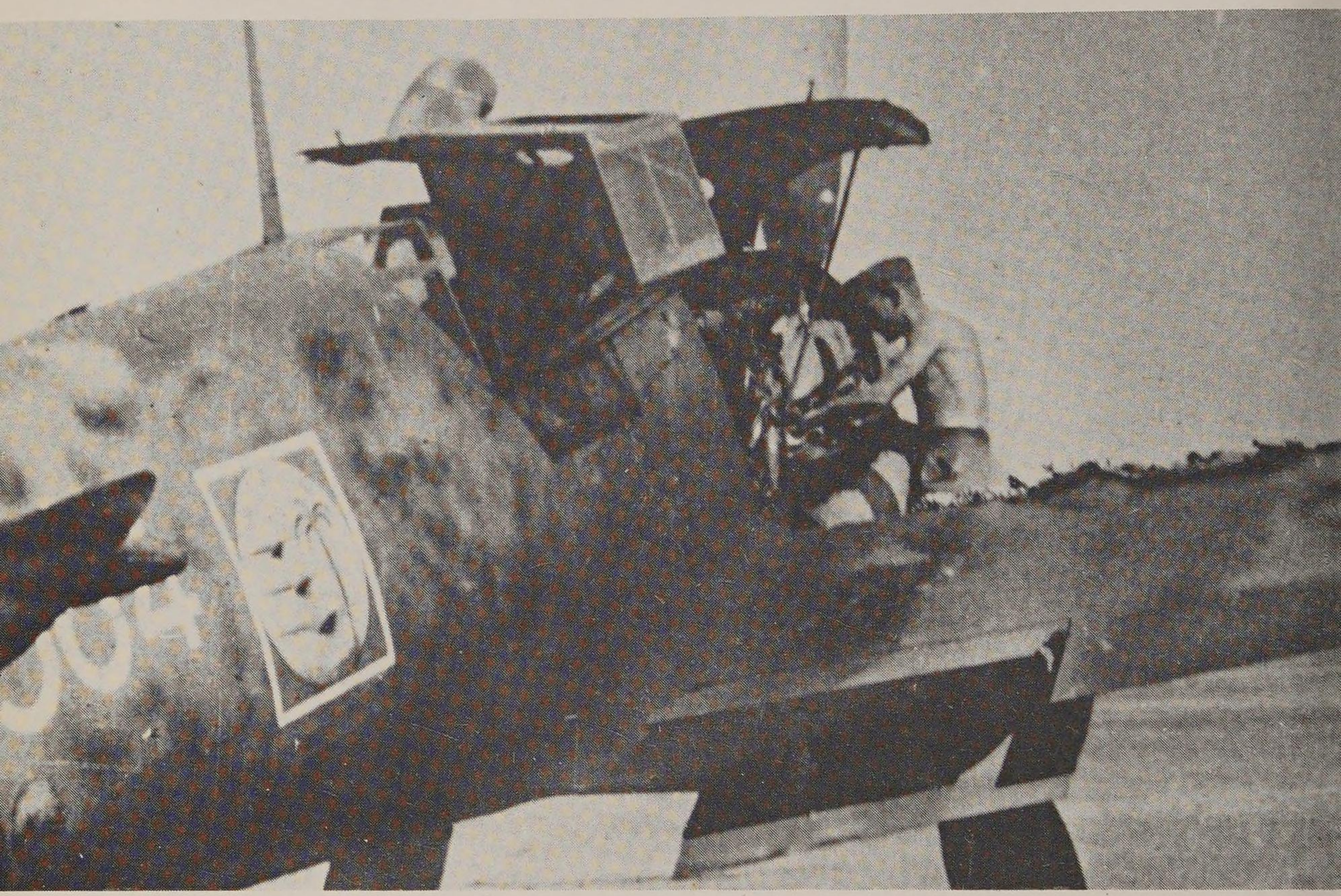
Top left: A Caproni-Vizzola F.5 at Ciampino; the pilot in the foreground is the unit commander, Capt Corrado Ricci, a veteran fighter pilot of the East African Campaign and the Spanish Civil War./*via C. Ricci. Bottom left:* In service with the night fighter gruppi by late 1942 were small numbers of Re2001CN aircraft, their normal inadequate armament augmented by the addition of a pair of 20mm. Mauser cannons in underwing gondolas./*via C. Ricci. Above:* An SM79sil, of 278ª Squadriglia, one of the units of the 'crack' 132ª Gruppo Aerosiluranti, in flight over Sicily late in 1942' This aircraft is making a low level 'beat-up. of an airfield for the benefit of official photographers./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* Bf110Cs of ZG 1 were rushed to the Mediterranean early in 1943 to assist III/ZG 26 and the Geschwader's own III Gruppe, which was equipped with Me210s, in escort missions to transport aircraft. The stay of these aircraft in the area was very short./*Bundesarchiv*

Above: A Bf109G of II/JG 51 taxies out for a mission from a Sicilian airfield in early summer 1943. By now Africa had fallen and an Allied invasion of Southern Europe was imminent./ *Bundesarchiv. Left:* The pilot of another II/JG 51 Bf109G steps out of his aircraft on return from a sortie./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* Substantial numbers of Italian fighters were available to take part in the defence of Sicily in summer 1943. Here MC202s of 374ª Squadriglia, 153º Gruppo, 54º Stormo CT, are prepared for a mission while a German sentry stands guard./ *Bundesarchiv*

Above: Regia Aeronautica personnel visit the dispersal of II/JG 53 on a Sicilian airfield. The nearest fighter is a Bf109G-6, the other two being G-2s. Note the bulge in front of the cockpit to accommodate the breeches of the larger calibre machine guns fitted in the later model./ *Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* A number of ex-French Dewoitine D520s were supplied to the Regia Aeronautica by the Germans to help make good the critical shortage of modern fighters. Several of these are seen on an airfield in Northern Italy. In Spring 1943 some of these aircraft arrived in Sicily to augment the Re2001s of 2° and 22° Gruppi CT, seeing action against American four-engined bombers./*State Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Above: Licence production of the Daimler-Benz DB-605A engine resulted in the appearance of three new Italian fighters, the Macchi C205V, the Fiat G-55, and the Reggiane Re-2005, early production examples of all these aircraft being rushed to units in Sicily. Here is an Re2005 Sagittario in service with 362ª Squadriglia of 22º Gruppo CT./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci. Below:* From Germany came a delivery of Bf109 aircraft in an effort to bolster flagging Italian fighter production. These were issued to two gruppi, the first to be so equipped being 150º Gruppo CT, recently returned from Africa. Here one of that unit's 364ª Squadriglia aircraft is seen. To the right is an MC200 of 384ª Squadriglia, 157º Gruppo CT, and in the background are several MC202s and an SM79./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

Below: This close-up of a 364ª Squadriglia Bf109 shows well the 'Gigi Trei Osei' emblem of 150º Gruppo CT./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*
Bottom: Two more Bf109s of 364ª Squadriglia are seen here, the pilot of one in the act of entering the cockpit of his aircraft. Italian and German records note the aircraft supplied as Bf109F-4s, but it is noteworthy that the fighters in these photographs have the bulges on the engine cowlings featured on the later models of the Bf109G. Possibly the G models were substituted for the Fs in the field, and without formal official approval./*Stato Maggiore via C. Ricci*

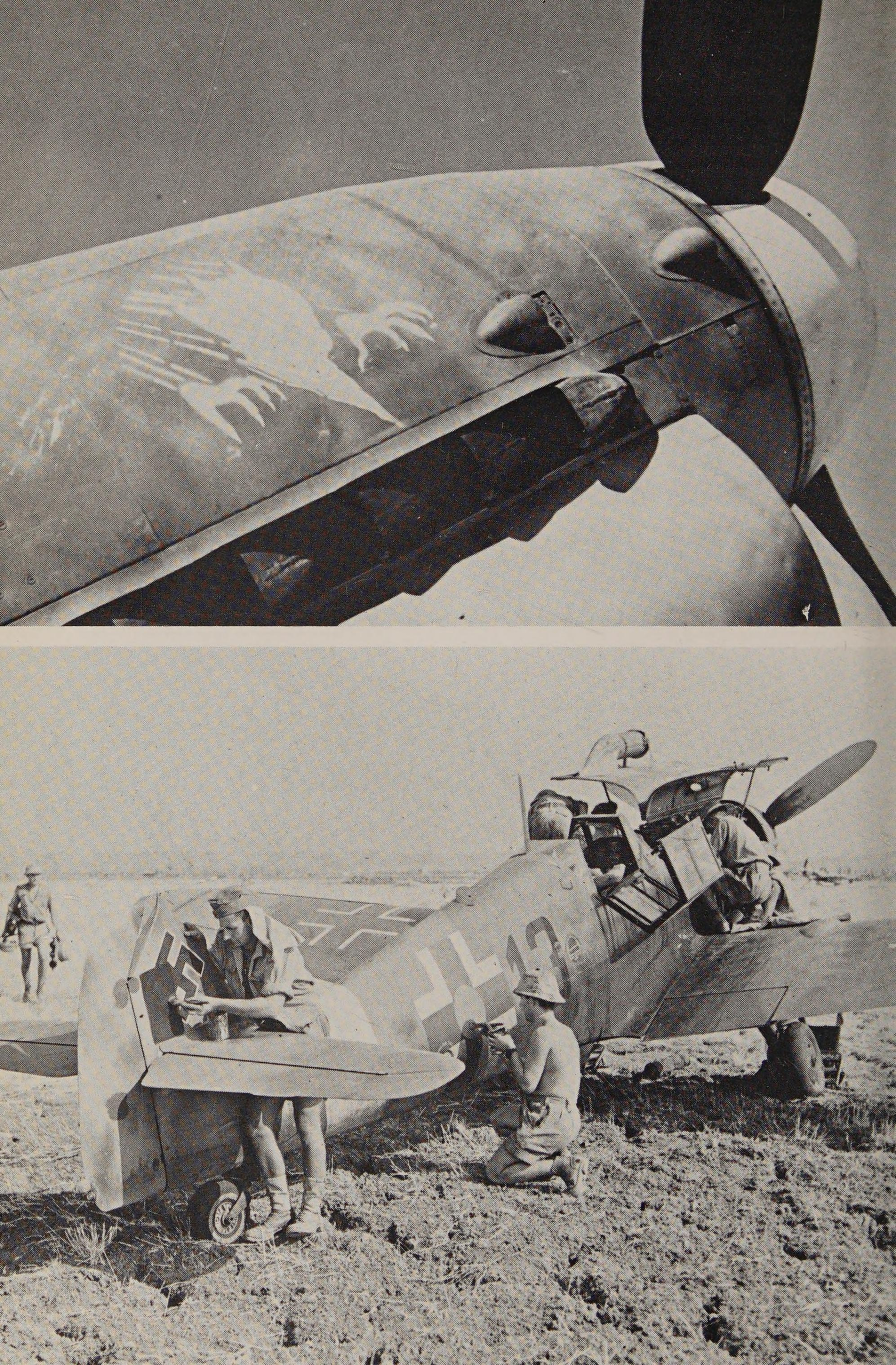


Below: Bf109G-14/Trop of JG 77 on a Sicilian airfield, showing the new Geschwader emblem introduced in April 1943—a red heart. The letters beneath the wing show this to be a newly-delivered aircraft, fresh from the factory. Note the second aircraft, from II/JG 77, in the background./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* Throughout May and June 1943 Allied bombers poured an endless deluge of bombs on Sicilian airfields. Aircraft are seen blazing after one such attack on Trapani airfield, with Ju 52/3m transports in the background./*F. Selinger via A. Price*

Left: A Macchi C202 of 155º Gruppo CT comes in to land at a Sicilian airfield, past a Bf109G of II/JG 51./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom left:* Ground crew personnel approaching a newly-landed MC202 of 360ª Squadriglia, 155º Gruppo, 51º Stormo CT./*Bundesarchiv. Right:* Top-scoring Italian fighter pilot of World War II, Capt Franco Lucchini, seen here with an MC202 of 4º Stormo CT, was credited with 21 victories to add to five gained earlier in Spain. He was killed by gunners in B-17s raiding Gerbini on July 5th 1943, after being seen to shoot down his final victim./*via D. Chalif. Below:* 1º Stormo CT MC-202 is greeted by two Luftwaffe pilots on its return from a mission. The aircraft is believed to be one of 372ª Squadriglia, 153º Gruppo./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: As the Axis forces were pressed back into the north-east corner of Sicily, following the invasion on July 10th 1943, nearly all airfields fell into Allied hands. Once more fleets of Ju 52/3m transports were brought in to fly supplies and ammunition to the defenders. Here a large formation of these aircraft are seen leaving the Italian coast en route for the Messina area./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* A Ju52/3m of KGrzbV 9 takes off for Sicily, watched by the crew of another of the unit's aircraft, and other personnel./*Bundesarchiv*

Top: The Sicilian airfields had many spoils for the Allied invaders, and here at Catania a good selection of Italian fighters are to be seen. In the foreground is a burnt out CR 42, while immediately beyond this are two of the new Re2005s of 362ª Squadriglia, 22° Gruppo CT, the nearest bearing the 'Sparracchio' emblem of the gruppo on the fuselage band. Beyond these fighters can be seen an MC202, and the wreckage of at least one more, and a G-50./*IWM. Above:* Victor and vanquished; in the foreground is a Spitfire 9 of Desert Air Force, while beyond it is an immaculate new Bf109G of II/JG 53, complete with underwing 20mm cannon gondolas./*IWM*



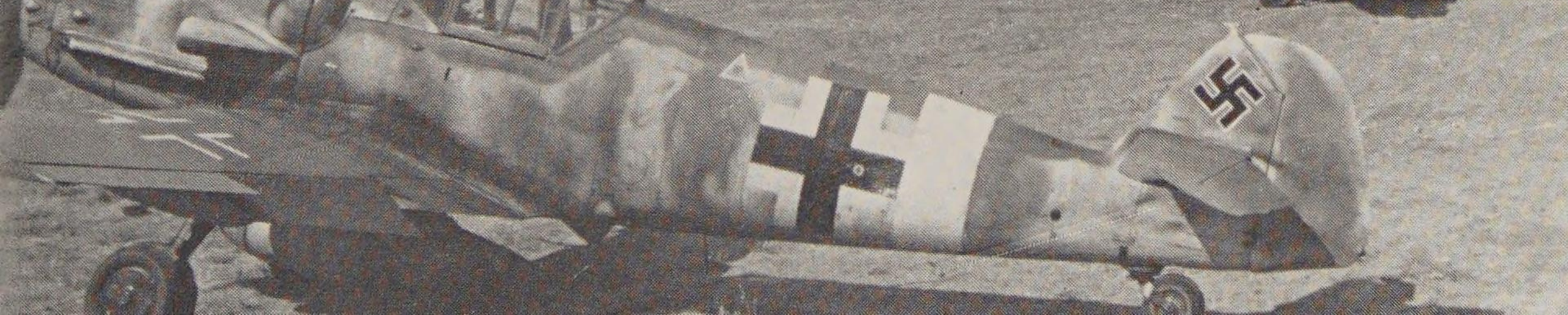
Top left: The second Italian gruppo to re-equip with Bf109s was 3° Gruppo CT. The nose of one of these, captured by Allied forces, shows well the unit's 'Diavolli Rossi' emblem./*IWM. Bottom left:* Ground crew of the SAAF begin painting roundel markings on a captured Bf109./*IWM Above:* This shattered MC202, still resplendent in full 4° Stormo CT markings, served with 84ª Squadriglia, 10° Gruppo. The breeches of the two nose-mounted 12.7mm Breda-Safat machine guns can be clearly seen in this illustration. Note also the badly damaged Go242 glider in the background./*IWM. Below:* Photographs of captured and shot-down aircraft often show unit markings seldom seen in formal poses for official photographers of the nations involved. Here an MC202 of 90ª Squadriglia, 10° Gruppo CT has been flicked over on to its back by bomb blast. In the background is another fighter of one of the other 4° Stormo units, 97ª Squadriglia, 9° Gruppo./*IWM*

Below: Closer shot of the 97ª Squadriglia MC202, together with a badly smashed Fi156 Storch./*IWM. Bottom:* Two Bf110Cs of ZG 1 display their 'Wespen' markings to the gaze of a South African officer. In the background is a Ca314 of 118 Squadriglia OA. ZG 1's remaining aircraft returned to Germany when the Sicilian airfields were evacuated./*IWM*

Below: New Zealand infantrymen and Italian ground staff examine an MC200 on a Sicilian airfield. The squadriglia number, apparently 352, has only partially been painted on the fuselage, and only roughly at that. In the background are other MC200s and CR42s./*IWM*

Bottom: British troops with a Meridionali Ro37bis in Sicily. By 1943 this was a totally obsolescent aircraft, probably used by the Regia Aeronautica as a 'hack' or liaison machine./*IWM*

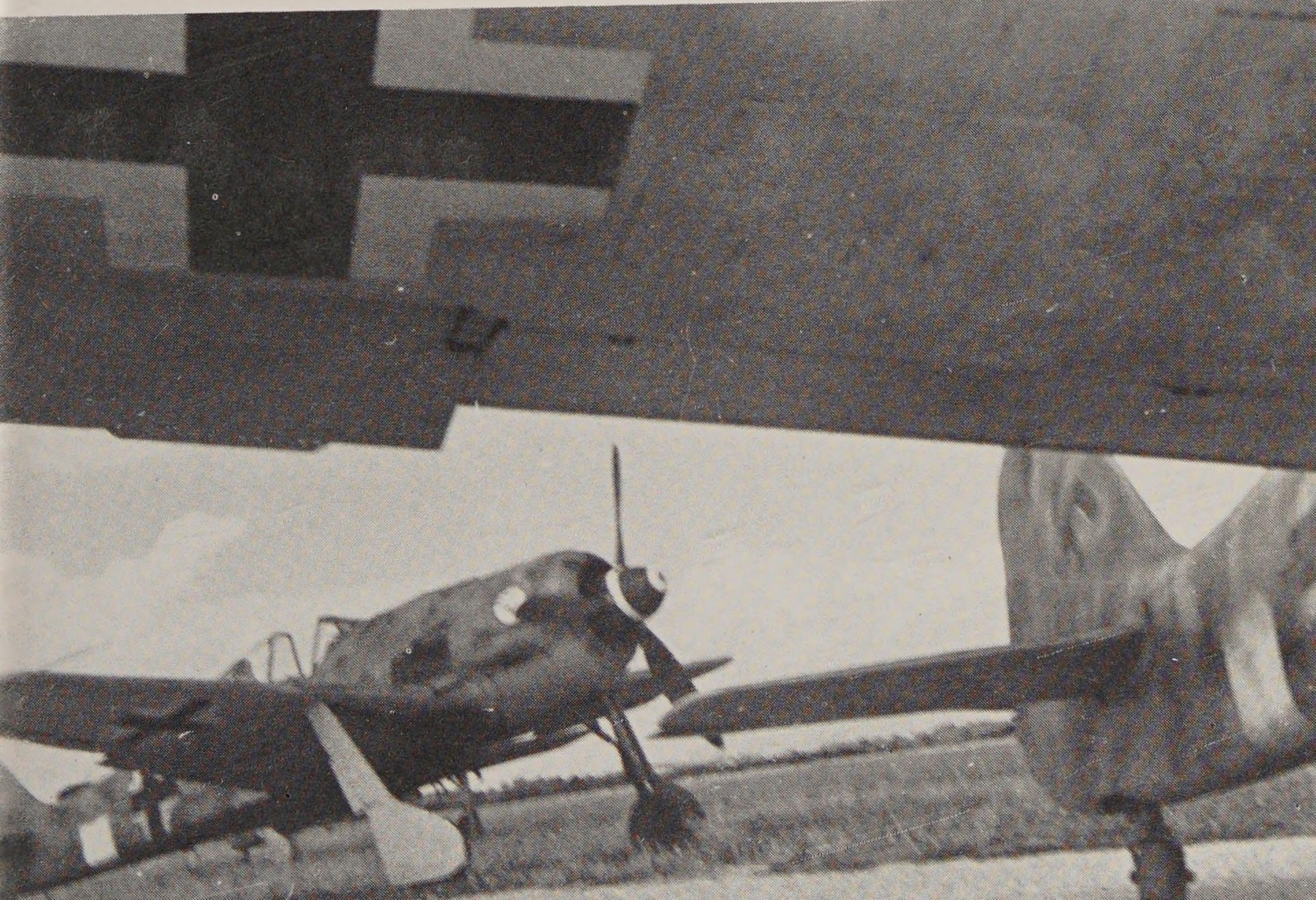
Left: Even after the fall of Sicily, some Regia Aeronaufica fighter units were still operational, defending southern and central Italy against attacks by American heavy bombers. 18º Gruppo of 3ª Stormo CT was one such unit, flying from Cerveteri, near Rome. Commanding officer of this Gruppo's 83ª Squadriglia was Capt Franco Bordoni-Bisleri, who claimed his 19th victory on September 4th 1943, only five days before the Italian surrender. He is seen here in the cockpit of his Macchi fighter; in the background is an SAI 207 lightweight fighter, one of 13 pre-production aircraft delivered to the Regia Aeronautica./ *F. Bordoni Bisleri. Below:* The invasion of the Italian mainland at Salerno in September 1943 brought the Dornier Do217K bombers of III/KG 100 from their bases in Southern France to attack both Allied shipping and the Italian fleet with Fritz X gliderbombs./*via A. Price. Bottom:* Bf109G-6s on an airfield in the Balkans in 1943. These are believed to be aircraft of IV/JG 27, which was very active during the autumn of that year in combating raids over Southern Europe by Africa-based B-24s and their P-38 escorts./*Bundesarchiv*



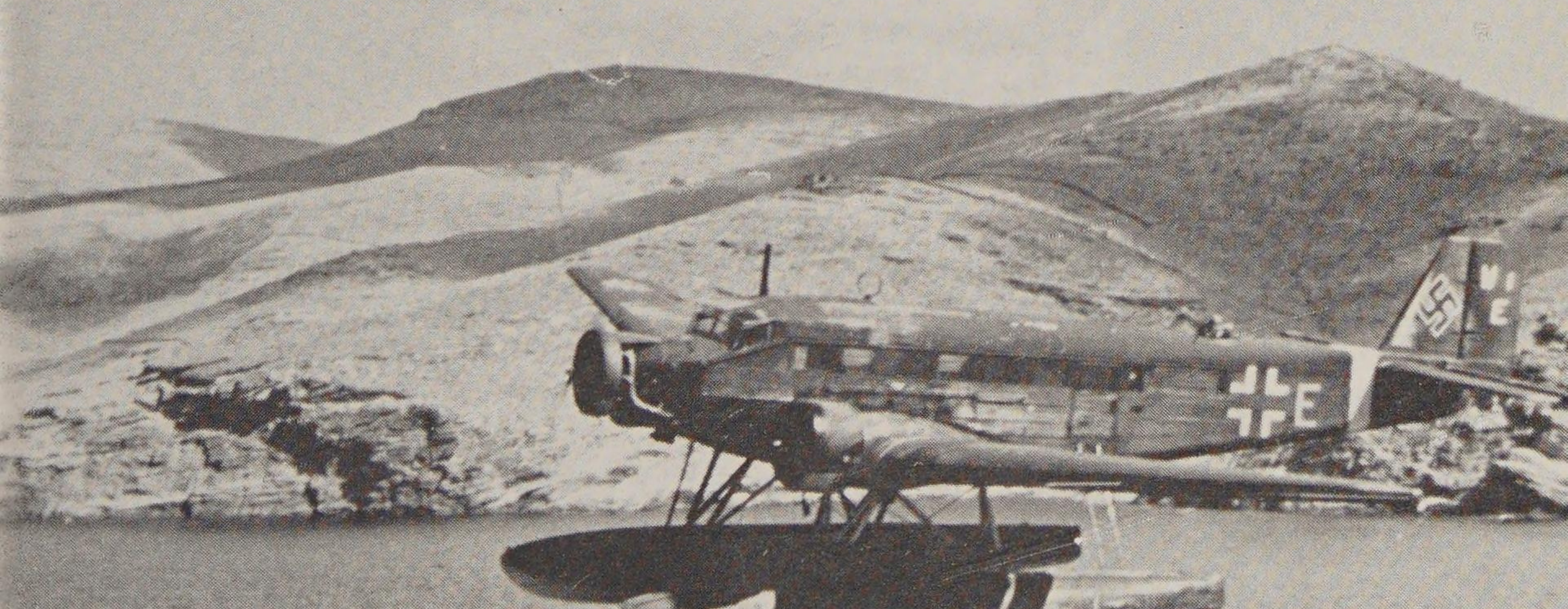
Above: The Italian armistice of September 9th 1943 brought many Italian aircraft to Allied airfields, most of them to serve later with the Co-Belligerent Air Force. Here British officers are seen with a number of Italian pilots who have brought in their MC202s. Note that all unit markings appear to have been painted over. In the background is an SM82./*IWM.Below* Newly-arrived SM79 bomber is inspected by American personnel. Note the RAF Beaufighter in the background./*IWM*

Above: Quite a prize! An officer of the SAAF casts an eye over a surrendered Piaggio P108B heavy bomber./*IWM. Below:* During the autumn of 1943 the greater part of the Luftwaffe in Italy retreated to airfields in the north, not appearing in force again until the Allied landings at Anzio in January 1944. These led to a renewal of German activity in the air. Here a Ju88A-4 is seen in the Rome area at this time, preparing to take off for a raid on the beachhead. The code letters PN+MT are factory delivery codes, and the aircraft is thought to be serving with KG 54./*Bundesarchiv*

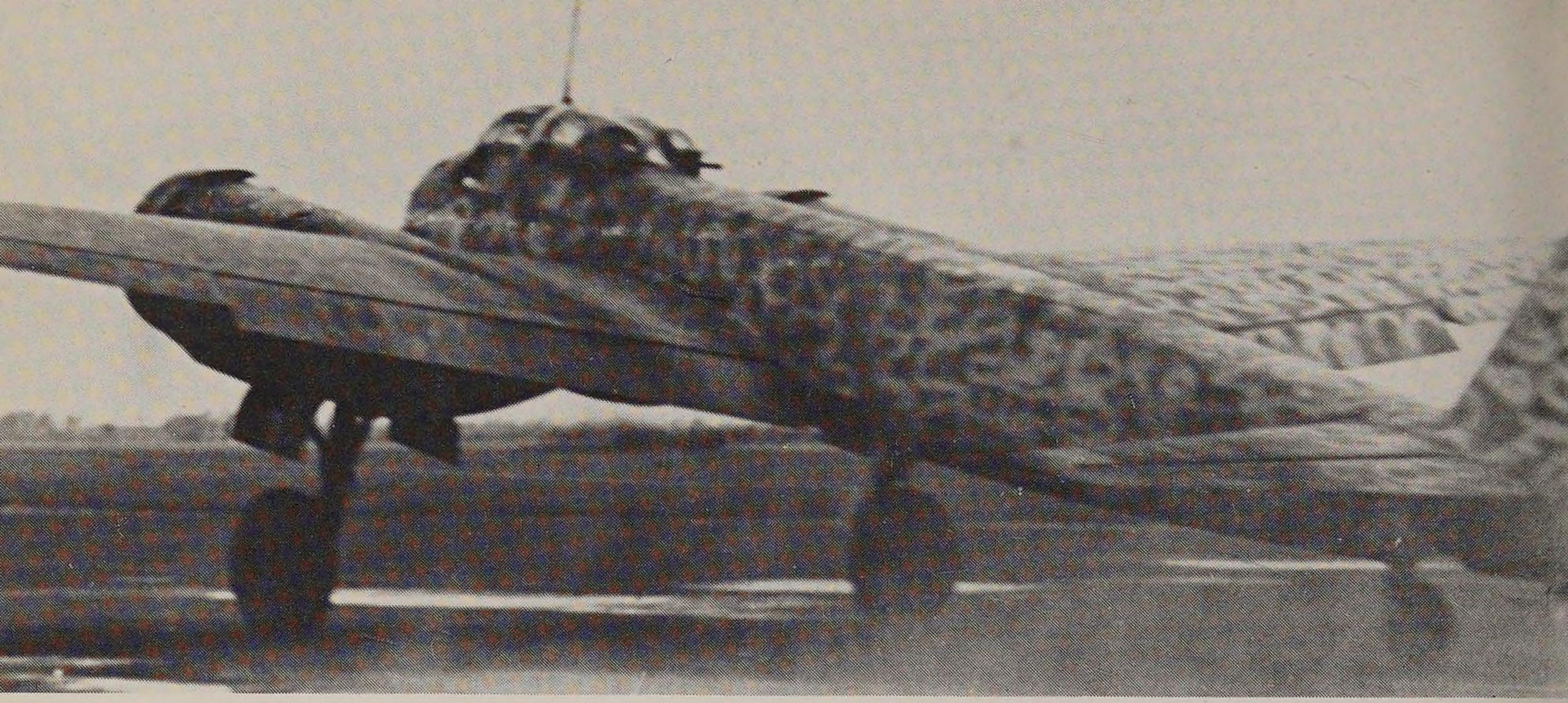
Below: An unidentified unit code is F5, seen here on this Heinkel He111H on a Rome airfield. It is probable that this aircraft was on the strength of KG 26./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom:* This bomber is also carrying the very much smaller unit codes introduced around the end of 1943 to Luftwaffe aircraft in the Mediterranean. L1 identifies this Ju88A-4 as a Crete-based aircraft of LG 1; the aircraft carries an all-black finish, and appears to have had sand or earth spread over the upper surface of the wings, fuselage and tailplane in an effort to camouflage it./*Bundesarchiv. Top right:* These Focke-Wulf Fw190A-5/U3 fighter-bombers of I/SG 4 served in Italy for a short period during late 1943/early 1944, the unit being virtually wiped out during this period./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* Fw190A-5/U3s of I/SG 4 on an Italian airfield./*Bundesarchiv*

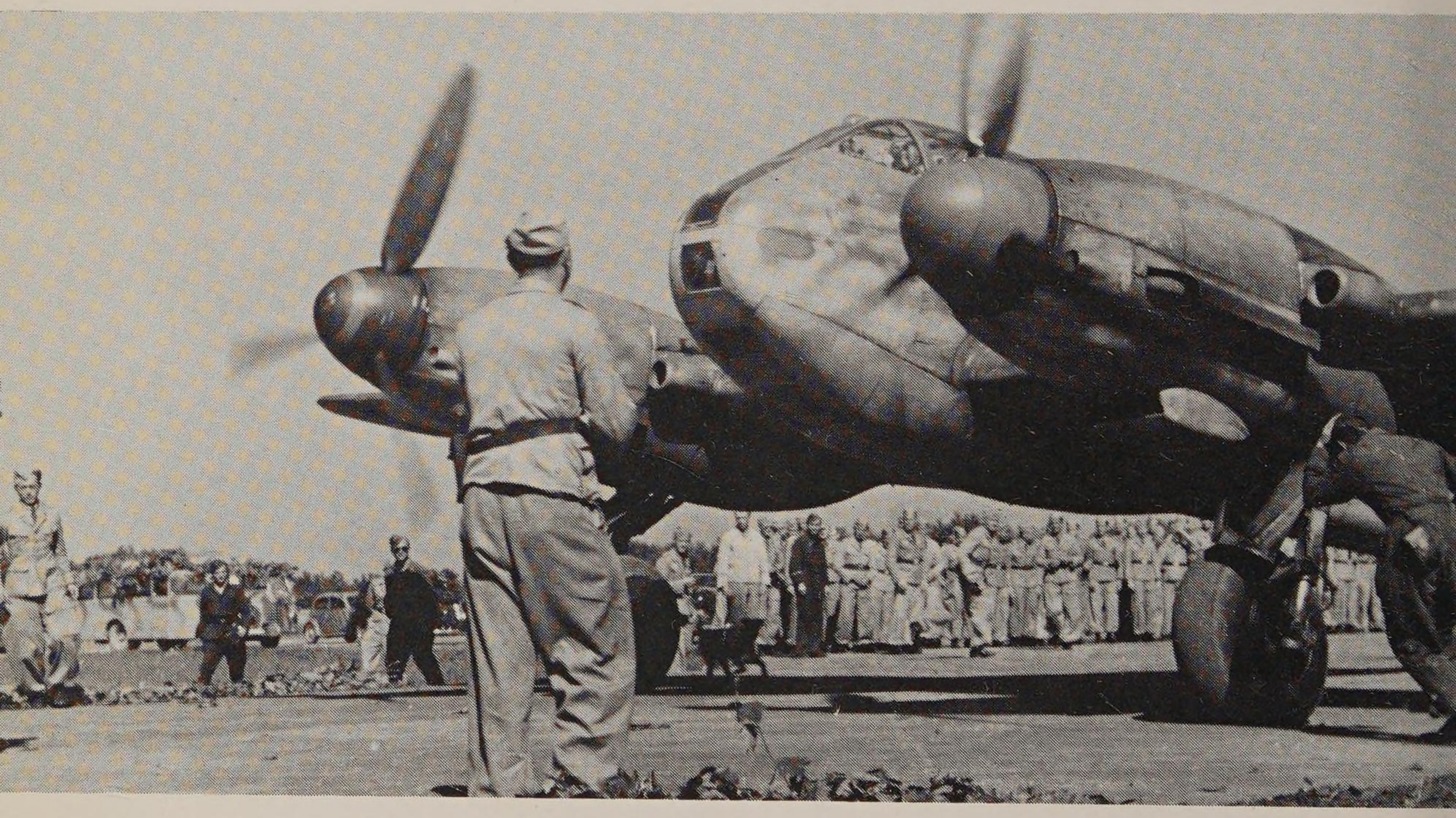


Below: Another view of several of I/SG 4's Fw190A-5/U3s in Italy. These aircraft saw considerable action as fighter-bombers over Salerno, the Volturno battlefield, and the Anzio beachhead, but suffered heavy losses to patrolling Allied fighters./*Bundesarchiv. Right:* Close-up of an Fw190A-5/U3 of I/SG 4 which has sunk in soft earth, and is having to be dug out. The aircraft has carried a name on its engine cowling alongside the unit insignia, but efforts appear to have been made to erase this./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* The growing preponderance of British air power over the Aegean during 1944 made the supply by sea of the island garrisons progressively more difficult. Growing numbers of transport aircraft had to be used, including Ju52/3ms fitted with floats. Here a Ju52/3mg 8e is seen in the vicinity of Leros./*Bundesarchiv*

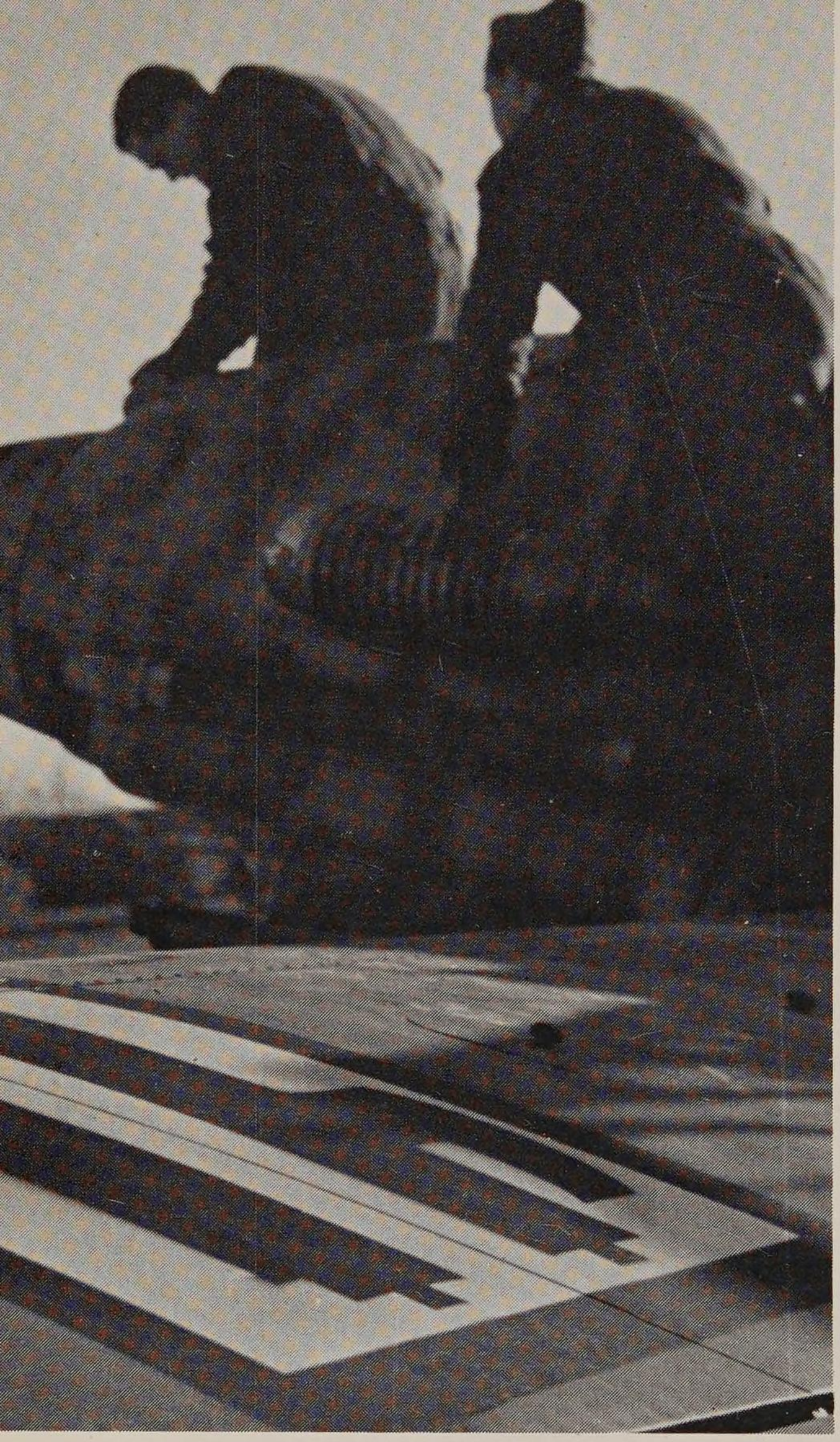


Top left: By September 1944 many of the Aegean garrisons were being evacuated, RAF night fighters taking a heavy toll of the Luftwaffe transport aircraft involved. Two float-equipped Ju52/3ms are seen here in company with one still fitted with a normal wheeled undercarriage; they are in flight above the Aegean./*Bundesarchiv. Left:* A Gruppenkommandeur of JG 53 inspects his Bf109G on an airfield in Central Italy in 1944. The ground crew are servicing the underwing 20mm cannon./*Bundesarchiv. Above:* A Ju88A-4 of KG 54 at Bergamo airfield in Northern Italy early in 1944./*H. Schliephake via A. Price. Right:* Another Ju88A-4 in Northern Italy in 1944, showing a most unusual unit marking. This illustration shows well the crew entry hatch, formed by the downward-hinged under rear gunner's position./*Bundesarchiv*

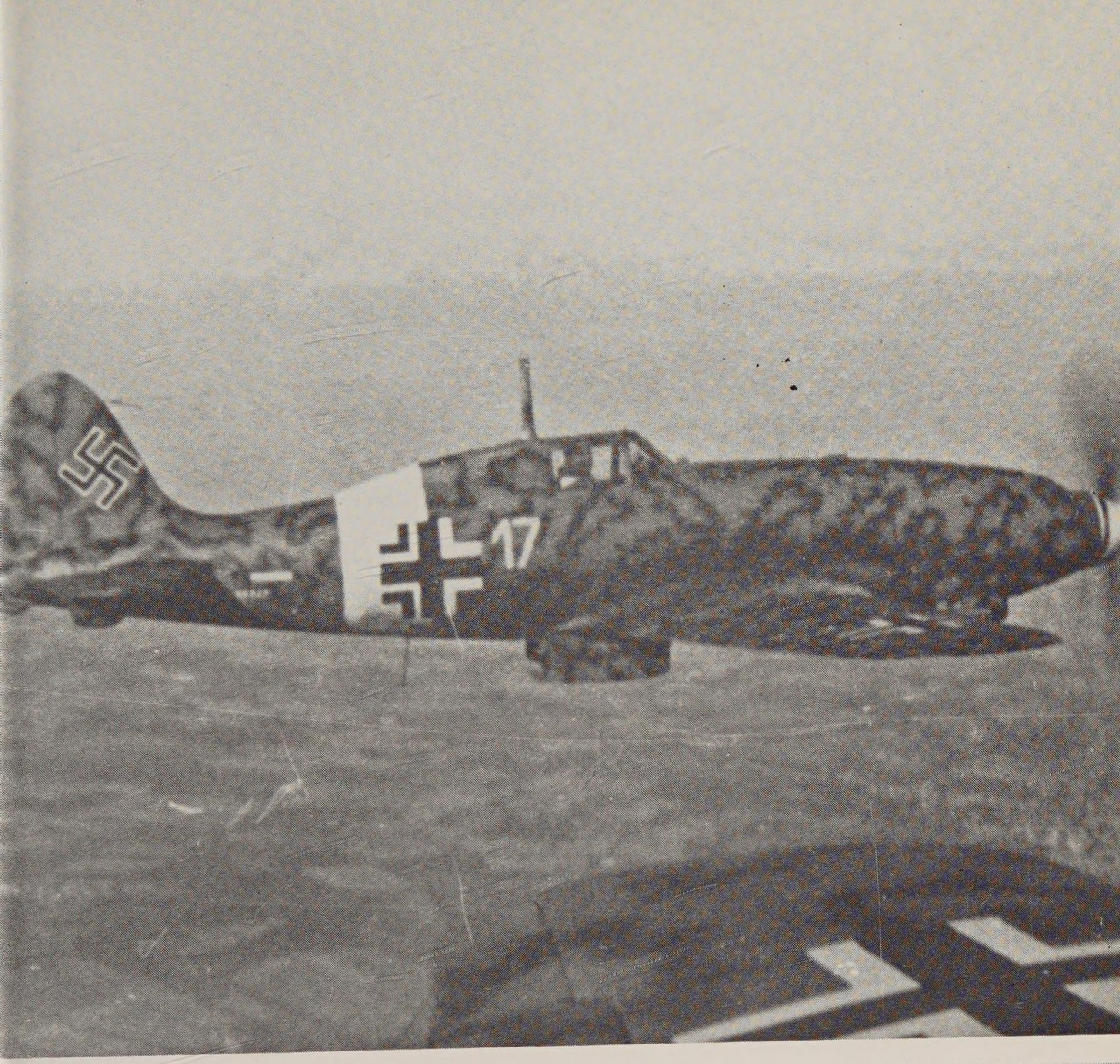




Top left: A Ju88A-4 begins its take-off run from a North Italian airfield./*Bundesarchiv Middle left:* Some of the most active Luftwaffe aircraft over the area of the front line during 1944 were the reconnaissance Messerschmitt Me410s of 2(F)/122, one of which is watched with interest by a large group of Luftwaffe personnel as it runs up its engines./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom left:* Although very fast, the Me410s were not always able to escape the patrols of high-flying Spitfires of the Desert Air Force, and one aircraft of 2(F)/122, F6+QK, is seen here after crash-landing in Allied territory, by the Sangro river. Note that the greater part of the starboard wing and engine cowling has apparently been torn off during the landing./*IWM. Below:* By the end of 1943 Italian forces in the north still loyal to Mussolini and the Fascist regime, had gathered sufficient aircraft to begin forming units. The first fighter unit, 1° Gruppo CT, was formed with Macchi C205V aircraft, one of which is seen here over the mountains of Northern Italy, in formation with a Bf109G of II/JG 77./*Bundesarchiv*



Left: Italian mechanics work on an MC205V of 1º Gruppo CT. The wing markings of the new Republica Sociale Italiana can clearly be seen here./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* MC205Vs of 1º Gruppo CT on their airfield. The aircraft taxiing carries the tricolour 'postage stamp' markings of the RSI on the fuselage and tail, while that in the left foreground has been painted with German markings, as were a number of RSI aircraft./*Bundesarchiv. Right:* Although carrying German national markings, including an over-sized swastika on the fin, this MC 205V is in fact an Italian-flown aircraft of 1º Gruppo CT's 2ª Squadriglia./*via G. Pini Bottom right:* By spring 1944 1º Gruppo CT's squadriglia were all flying with RSI markings, and the two units had also adopted colourful insignia. Here a group of 2ª Squadriglia pilots stand in front of one of their MC205Vs, carrying on its nose the new 'Vespa Arrabbiata' emblem./*via G. Pini*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Top: A pilot of 2ª Squadriglia, 1º Gruppo CT, with an MC205V, showing rather more clearly the unit emblem—an angry wasp armed with a dagger. The pilot is believed to be Serg Magg Zaccaria./*via G. Pini. Above:* Personnel of 2ª Squadriglia with one of the unit's vehicles, camouflaged and carrying the unit emblem, in a similar manner to the aircraft./*via G. Pini*

Top: The RSI put into the line not only several fighter units, but also an autonomous torpedo-bomber unit, the Gruppo Autonomo Aero-siluranti. This gruppo was very active over the Northern Mediterranean, and even undertook one night attack on Allied shipping at Gibraltar in June 1944. One of its torpedo-carrying SM 79-IIIs is seen here as it comes in to land./ *Bundesarchiv. Above:* A Bf109G of JG 77 on an Italian airfield in 1944, well-shrouded in camou-flage netting. This aircraft is the mount of a Gruppe-Adjutant, but of which Gruppe is uncertain./*Bundesarchiv*

Left: Luftwaffe fighter pilots celebrate their Geschwader's 4,000th aerial victory of the war in front of a late model Bf109G in Northern Italy. The unit is believed to be JG 77./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* After the summer of 1944 the number of Luftwaffe units operating in Italy dropped sharply, as gruppen were transferred to France, or to the Eastern Front, where the situation was more critical. Here a late-model Bf109G is prepared for action at a dispersal on a bomb-blasted Italian airfield in the latter part of 1944./*Bundesarchiv. Right:* By 1945, apart from a few reconnaissance units, the only Luftwaffe aircraft still operating regularly in Italy were the night-flying Ju87D-7s of Nachtschlachtgruppe 9. These aircraft featured a heavier fixed armament of 20mm cannon in the wings; the port cannon muzzle can be seen clearly here./*Bundesarchiv. Bottom right:* A pair of NSGr 9's Ju87D-7s are seen here on their airfield. Note how the Balkankreuz on the fuselage has been almost obliterated by undersurface camouflage paint./*Bundesarchiv*

Left: The gunner prepares to drop into his cockpit in an NSGr 9 Ju87D-7. Note the muzzles and ring-and-bead sights of his pair of rear defence machine guns. This unit suffered heavy losses to RAF night fighters over the Italian front./*Bundesarchiv. Below:* After the surrender in May 1945, British troops inspect a Henschel Hs126 of one of the Nachtschlachtgruppen of Luftflotte 4 on an Austrian airfield. These units operated regularly over Yugoslavia during the closing months of the war. In the left background are an Arado Ar96B trainer and a Caudron Goeland light transport, while to the right is a Siebel Si 204 liaison aircraft./*IWM. Bottom:* Captured German and Hungarian trainer aircraft on an Austrian airfield. Note that the aircraft in the foreground, while carrying basically German markings, has a rudder painted with old-style Hungarian markings. The aircraft next to it has the later style of Hungarian markings; these aircraft are Arado Ar96Bs. Various other types can be picked out, including Klemm K135Ds and Bücker Bu181s./*IWM*

Siebel Si204 liaison aircraft on Klagenfurt airfield, Austria. In the background is a Boston IV of the RAF; in the foreground, a British field kitchen./*IWM*

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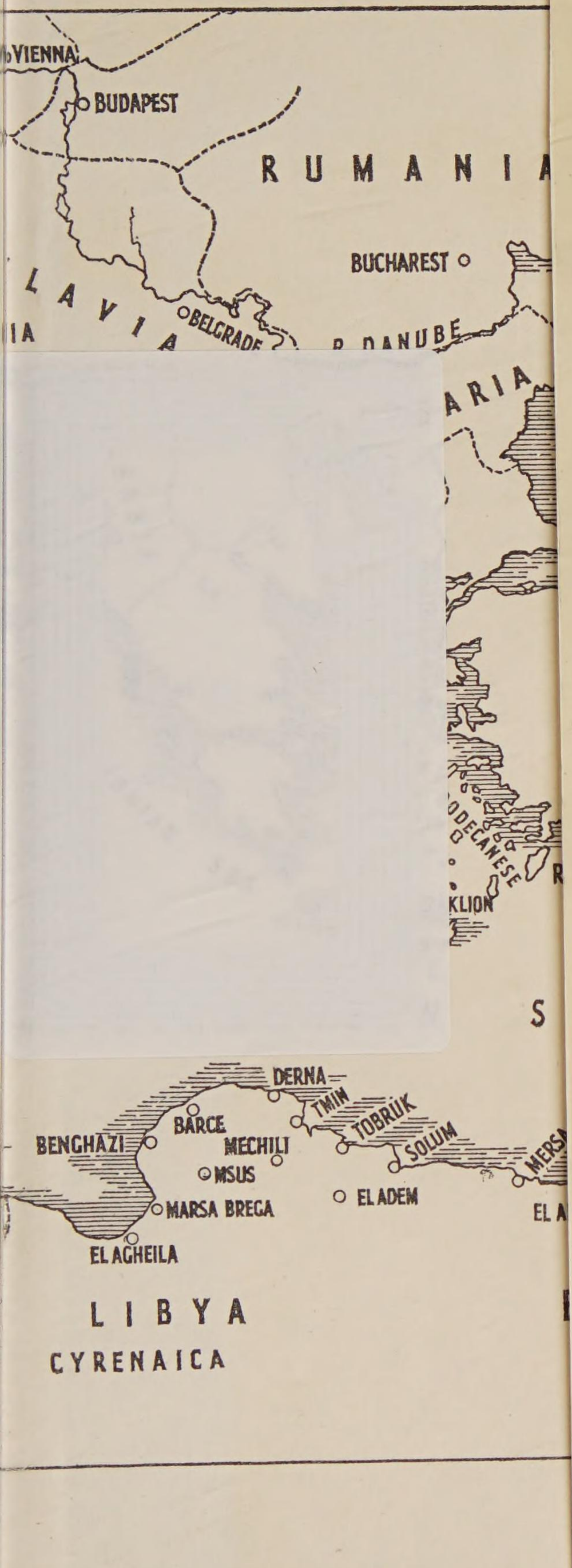

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